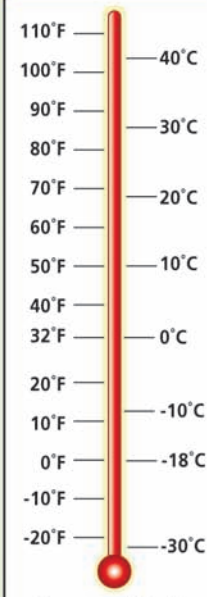
Frommer's®

Southeast Asia

VISIT…

METRIC CONVERSIONS

TEMPERATURE



To convert F to C:
subtract 32 and multiply by 5/9 (.555)
To convert C to F:
multiply by 1.8 and add 32
32˚F = 0˚C

LIQUID VOLUME

To convert	*multiply by*
U.S. gallons to liters	3.8
Liters to U.S. gallons	.26
U.S. gallons to imperial gallons	.83
Imperial gallons to U.S. gallons	1.20
Imperial gallons to liters	4.55
Liters to imperial gallons	.22

1 liter = .26 U.S. gallon
1 U.S. gallon = 3.8 liters

DISTANCE

To convert	*multiply by*
inches to centimeters	2.54
centimeters to inches	.39
feet to meters	.30
meters to feet	3.28
yards to meters	.91
meters to yards	1.09
miles to kilometers	1.61
kilometers to miles	.62

1 ft. = .30m ***1 mile = 1.6km***
1m = 3.3 ft. ***1km = .62 mile***

WEIGHT

To convert	*multiply by*
Ounces to grams	28.35
Grams to ounces	.035
Pounds to kilograms	.45
Kilograms to pounds	2.20

1 ounce = 28 grams
1 pound = .4555 kilogram

1 gram = .04 ounce
1 kilogram = 2.2 pounds

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Frommer's®

Southeast Asia

6th Edition

by Sherisse Pham, Ron Emmons, Jennifer Eveland & Jen Lin-Liu

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Production Editor: Michael Brumitt
Cartographer: Andrew Murphy
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Back cover photo: Thailand, Krabi: Ao Nang beach

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sherisse Pham graduated from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and immediately flitted across the Pacific Ocean to set up residence in Asia. She has worked on *Frommer's* travel guides for Beijing, China, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia. When not traveling on assignment, Sherisse covers the Beijing beat for international publications such as *Women's Wear Daily, People Magazine, CNN.com, the South China Morning Post,* and *Zagat Survey.* She currently resides in Beijing.

Ron Emmons taught English in Africa and the Americas before moving to Thailand, where he now works as a freelance writer/photographer. He is the author and photographer of *Portrait of Thailand* and *Walks Along the Thames Path* (New Holland, UK), as well as writer of *Top Ten Bangkok* (Dorling Kindersley, UK) and *Spiral Guide to the Dominican Republic* (Automobile Association, UK). Ron has also made major contributions to several other guide books, such as the *Rough Guide to Vietnam* and *National Geographic Traveler Vietnam.*

Jennifer Eveland spent part of her childhood in Singapore, has studied in Hong Kong, lived for a spell in Bangkok, and has traveled extensively throughout East and Southeast Asia. In addition to her contributions to *Frommer's Southeast Asia,* she authors *Frommer's Singapore & Malaysia* and has updated previous editions of *Frommer's Thailand.* In 1999 she returned to Singapore, where she has been based as a full-time freelance writer. She writes regularly for *The International Herald Tribune,* and contributes travel, finance, and lifestyle stories to numerous local and international magazines, newspapers, and books. She lives near Little India with her husband, a Singaporean musician and producer, their toddler son, and their three cats.

Jen Lin-Liu is the author of the food memoir *Serve the People: A Stir-Fried Journey Through China* and the owner of Black Sesame Kitchen, a cooking school in Beijing. She was raised in southern California, graduated from Columbia University, and went to China in 2000 on a Fulbright fellowship. She has also written for *Newsweek, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Saveur,* and *Food & Wine.* Jen would like to thank Candice Lee for her research help.

AN INVITATION TO THE READER

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

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AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

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FROMMER'S STAR RATINGS, ICONS & ABBREVIATIONS

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system.** In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **seven feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

Finds	Special finds—those places only insiders know about
Fun Facts	Fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
Kids	Best bets for kids and advice for the whole family
Moments	Special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
Overrated	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
Tips	Insider tips—great ways to save time and money
Value	Great values—where to get the best deals

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE American Express	DISC Discover	V Visa
DC Diners Club	MC MasterCard	

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- Newsletters highlighting the hottest travel trends
- Podcasts, interactive maps, and up-to-the-minute events listings
- Opinionated blog entries by Arthur Frommer himself
- Online travel message boards with featured travel discussions

What's New in Southeast Asia

Much of what's so fascinating to travelers in Southeast Asia is the ephemeral: that friendly shopkeeper who invites you to sample something new, a hole-in-the-wall antiques store, a local specialty served at street side, seemingly impromptu festivals, and the kindness of strangers. These serendipitous moments—some call them "trail magic"—are what make exploring this part of the world so memorable and yet so maddening for the publisher of a guidebook to chronicle. Those quaint little corners are as fickle as shooting stars and can often be found only by searching, only to disappear or change if sought after again. Our advice: Search away. Follow a passion—an interest in local cuisine, history, or architecture—and ask around. Go where the locals go. Accept invites where appropriate and take your time—things unfold slowly in this part of the world. Visitors come away with their own experiences and impressions in even the shortest visit to this diverse region.

Below we list a few of the major changes in this updated edition. Travelers to Southeast Asia need to be hip to fluctuations in the international airline scene in today's cautious climate. While some Asian airlines have eliminated North American routes, many North American carriers have begun offering rock-bottom rates for premium flights, and there are even some new international connections. Check with ticket consolidators or carriers that sell regional multistop tickets: See Cathay Pacific (www.cathay.com), for example, or look into special travel passes arranged by ASEAN (www.asean-tourism.com).

Safety is on the mind of every traveler these days, and despite the public-relations disaster of the SARS crisis, avian influenza, and some political hot spots in the region, the well-informed traveler in Southeast Asia can be sure of a trouble-free trip and manageable adventures.

THAILAND

Though Thailand is generally one of the most politically stable countries in Southeast Asia, it has been experiencing unusual levels of conflict since a coup in September 2006 ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. After a year of military rule, Samak Sundaravej was elected prime minister as head of the People's Power Party (PPP), taking over in January 2008. However, many saw him as a proxy for the deposed Thaksin, and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) took to the streets to demonstrate in August 2008 and occupied Government House to register their displeasure with the situation.

Samak was removed from office by the Constitutional Court in September 2008 and replaced by Somchai Wongsawat. However, this change failed to appease the PAD since Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law, and protests have continued. At the end of 2008, the situation remained fragile, with the possibility of dissolution of parliament and new elections. These problems generally pose no threat to tourists as long as they avoid areas of protest.

However, it should be noted that the far south of the country *is* violent, as Muslim extremists terrorize the Buddhist population, police, and military. Attacks blamed

on Muslim groups have moved north from the immediate bor der ar eas of P attani, Narathiwat, and Yala provinces to Hat Yai in S ongkhla P rovince, a major transit point in the south. Although these attacks were isolated incidents, they did target tourist ar eas and at least two for eign nationals w ere killed. Travel to the far south is generally discouraged, although train service to Butterworth in Malaysia is generally considered safe, as it stays west of the most troublesome provinces.

In more positive travel news, the shiny **Suvarnabhumi I nternational Airpor t,** plagued by construction delays, cost o verruns, lost baggage, and cracks in the r unway after its opening in S eptember 2006, is no w functioning smoothly . H owever, the old airport at Don Muang is now handling domestic, nonconnecting flights—so make sur e y ou kno w which airpor t you're flying in and out of . The new airport is r oughly 30km (18 miles) east of central Bangkok, and in 2009 will be connected to the city 's skytrain system b y a high-speed rail link. When the line is complete, the airport will only be a 15-minute ride fr om do wntown. U ntil then, the options are bus, taxi, limo, r ental car, or a layover in the **Novotel S uvarnabhumi Airport Hotel** (✆ **02131-1111**), the only hotel serving the airport.

As for shiny ne w things in **Bangkok,** the **JW M arriott** (✆ **02656-7700**), located in the heart of the busy Sukhumvit shopping ar ea, is leading the way in in-room, high-tech conv enience. Tucked away in the back str eets of S ukhumvit is the enchanting **Eugenia** (✆ **02259-9017-9**), a boutique hotel waiting to transpor t you back to the 19th centur y. O n the Chao P hraya, the **Millennium H ilton** (✆ **02442-2000**) adds another name to the already prestigious list of luxur y river-front spots. B ack in the city center , the massive **CentralWorld** shopping mall has added half a million squar e meters (mor e than 5 million sq. ft.) of shopping space to a city that was alr eady a dr eam for shopaholics.

Pattaya expects to see ev en mor e business with the ne w airpor t at U-Tapao, just more than an hour 's driv e away, and the **Amari Orchid Resort & Tower** (✆ **03841-8418**) is hoping to cash in. I t has no w added a fiv e-star luxur y wing to the pr evious four-star pr operty for a total of mor e than 500 rooms. The hotel also features the exclusive **Mantra** (✆ **03842-9591**), one of the best new restaurants in the country. On the south end of the beach, the **Sheraton Pattaya** (✆ **03825-9888**) is the best spot for a secluded getaway.

Farther east, the islands of **Ko S amet** and **Ko Chang,** once solely the domain of backpackers, no w hav e sev eral luxur y resorts: the ex clusive, all-villa **Paradee** (✆ **03864-4283-8**) on S amet; and the **Amari E merald Cov e** (✆ **03955-2000**), one of the chain's best, on Chang.

The most popular island destinations continue to be **Ko S amui** and **Phuket,** back to full speed after the 2004 tsunami. Both islands ar e slo wly sinking fr om the weight of the r esorts that hav e been built in r ecent y ears. O f these, a special nod goes to **Six S enses H ideaway S amui** (✆ **07724-5678**), voted best resort in the world b y *Condé N ast Traveler* r eaders in 2008.

The beachfronts of **Krabi,** a nice alternative to busy Phuket, have also seen their fair share of construction, with the luxurious **Sofitel Krabi Phokeethra** (✆ **07562-7800**) and the ev en mor e ex clusive **Centara G rand Beach R esort & Villas Krabi** (✆ **07563-7789**) opening their doors during the last y ear.

Ko Phi Phi, thoroughly destroyed by the 2004 tsunami, is back to its old tricks and has added a tr uly unique boutique r esort, **Zeavola** (✆ **07562-7024**), that hear kens back to rural Thailand of the 1950s.

In **Chiang M ai,** the ne w kids on the block ar e the **Shangri-La** (✆ **05325-3888**) and **Le Meridien** (✆ **05325-3666**),

both with an excellent location just a few steps from the famous Night Bazaar. They promise to give stiff competition to other luxury hotel chains already established in the northern capital, such as Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental, and the Dusit group.

In the far north near the once mysterious **Golden Triangle,** those with the means should look into the **Four Seasons Tented Camp** (✆ **05391-0200**), a superluxe, superexclusive resort. Getting to the camp requires a Kurtzian ride up the Mekong; once there, you will be pampered and wined and dined between *mahout* (elephant riding) classes and boat trips on the river.

LAOS

French military men in the early 19th century bemoaned the posting of disciplined officers to Laos, telling of how the languid pace and earthly delights spoiled the men and made mush out of good soldiers. Things haven't changed much; in fact, after a visit to Laos, it's hard to get back into the rat race.

Security for travelers is not an issue, but some reports over the last decade give pause (see "Safety Concerns," p. 217). The main north-south highway, Route 13, has been free of insurgent activity for some time now, but public bus company employees still carry machine guns just in case, which can be seen as either reassuring or terrifying. The national carrier, once called Lao Aviation, has renamed itself **Lao Airlines** (www.laoairlines.com); it has acquired a number of new planes and flies new routes, offering better service and a stronger commitment to safety (though it still has yet to pass international safety standards).

Much of the recent foreign investment in Laos has gone toward improving the roads. Not long ago, roads outside of the major towns were unpaved and many were impassable during the rainy season. The highways are much improved now, but rural roads are still reserved for the hardy.

In **Vientiane,** the capital, the newly opened **City Inn Vientiane** (✆ **021/218-333**) is a stylish midpriced option just off the main drag. If you're looking for a room with great views of the Mekong, quirky character, and a whole lot of color, check yourself into the **Hotel Beau Rivage Mekong** (✆ **021/243-350**). In foodie news, **Amphone** (✆ **020/771-1138**) serves excellent Lao fare in a gorgeous outdoor setting.

Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage city of quaint French colonial buildings and stunning original temples along the Mekong, is the country's premier attraction. Many of the old colonials have been converted into stylish boutique hotels, with all renovations sticking to strict guidelines from UNESCO in hopes of retaining the town's history and charm. The newly opened **Villa Maly** (✆ **071/253-904**) is a converted former royal residence mixing luxury accommodations with a sense of colorful whimsy. In other news, details remain top secret, but we have it on good authority that an **Amman** resort is currently under construction in the town proper. **La Résidence Phou Vao** (✆ **071/212-194**) continues to be a top choice for luxury, but those seeking rooms closer to the central action head straight for **Maison Souvannaphoum** (✆ **071/254-609**), once the residence of the former prime minister Prince Souvannaphouma.

Ecotourism is still what brings many travelers to rural Laos, and the folks at **Green Discovery** (✆ **021/223-022;** www.greendiscoverylaos.com) lead adventurous trips out into the back of beyond.

VIETNAM

It's official; Vietnam is a tourism powerhouse. While backpackers still flock here in droves, Vietnam draws its fair share of upscale travelers, drawn here by the quality service and luxury hotels that have become hallmarks of the country's tourism industry. The economy is thundering along, and in

the service sector, this means choices upon choices. And while the very shape of Vietnam lends itself to linear travel, it won't be long before the country becomes a region-specific locale that visitors will want to visit time and again. Vietnam is now a member of the WTO, and in 2008 we witnessed an official exchange between the top leaders of the U.S. and Vietnam for the fourth year in a row when President Bush welcomed Prime Minister Nguyen Tran Dung to the Oval Office. A certain pride is welling into the people along the old tourist trail, and Vietnam's war years are well behind it. Meanwhile, international investment continues to pour in, bringing with it international standards, styles, and sensibilities, and while it was always evident in Saigon, the entire country has a bustling feeling that is infectious and a joy for today's traveler.

Despite its popularity, Vietnam remains relatively cheap. Prices are rising in lodging from small guesthouses to luxury resorts, and in most restaurants. The price hikes are highest in the big cities; you'll be hard-pressed to find bargain accommodations in Saigon. Elsewhere, the increase is marginal, and service and quality remain high priorities. Leave the well-trod path, and you'll still find a seductive, sleepy Vietnam, where poised fruit sellers push bicycles through clattering streets, old Chinese inscriptions line the walls, and crowded public markets offer all the sights and sounds visitors have come to love and seek out in Vietnam. Plenty of discoveries await travelers, but, at the end of a day or a week of adventuring, comfort and good prices remain, right where you want them to be.

For evidence of real change, visit **Hanoi.** It's beginning to resemble Saigon, albeit less glitzy and glassy. But more and more cars are replacing motorcycles, and more motorcycles are replacing bicycles. Urgency has taken hold here in recent years, and Hanoi is emerging as a hip little capital, with a growing number of locals and expats involved in interesting affairs, from art to music and other entertainment. A good bet is the brand-new **InterContinental Hanoi West Lake** (✆ **04/3270-8888**), a resort-like getaway and one of the most stylish hotels to hit Hanoi in years. The hotel is far from the bustle of the Old Quarter, but close to **Xuan Dieu Street** (pronounced Shuan *Zee*-oh), a small street of boutiques and good eats.

Unfortunately, the natural beauty of **Halong Bay** is becoming overrun with budget junks, and it seems the only way to get away from the traffic is to pay premium prices for boats that travel a separate path through the karsts. Among those, the pack leader is the newly launched ***Halong Ginger*** (✆ **04/984-2807**). **Life Resort's** (✆ **08/3844-3605**) fleet of 22 deluxe boats, set to launch in late 2009, is sure to give the Ginger a healthy dose of competition.

While you're in the north, don't miss a visit to **Sapa,** a once quiet, now bustling hive of activity for some of Vietnam's many hill tribes. As expected, all the development that's come to Sapa has taken away some of its quiet charm, but that only means you can get farther into neighboring areas with tours to other villages, valleys, and markets. Trek in the shadow of **Fansipan,** the region's highest mountain, and enjoy the cool air, or just wander Sapa, a gathering spot for the hill-tribe men and women, who are starting to combine traditional swaddling with the trappings of a globalized world—hot-pink hats or knockoff sneakers, for example. Getting here by train and bus has become increasingly easy. Look out for **Life Heritage Resort Sapa,** set to open in late 2010. Call Life Resorts (✆ **08/3844-3605**) for the latest updates on that project.

Colonial **Hue** offers visitors many chances to travel through Vietnam's varied past, from its time under Chinese rule to the American war. **La Résidence Hôtel & Spa** (✆ **054/837-475**) is hands down the best hotel in this picturesque city. New to this guide is the **Imperial Hotel** (✆ **054/822-222**), a

contemporary affair whose rooftop bar has killer views of the Perfume River.

One of the best singular cities in Vietnam remains **Hoi An,** an ancient old town protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It can make for days of entertaining wanderings, but equally tempting are the southern tip of China Beach and its breaking waves. Between the old town and the sea lies a real look at modern Vietnam, from *pho* shops to river fishing boats; travel between the two by rented bicycle. Popular **Life Heritage Resort Hoi An** (✆ **510/391-4555**), reopened in August 2008 after 6 months of major renovations; rooms are more spacious and a new spa has been added. In the old town, the newly opened **Morning Glory** (✆ **0510/3241-555**) is a popular low-key eatery serving healthy Vietnamese street food.

Nha Trang, once known as a party town on the backpackers' Southeast Asian circuit, has grown up into a bona fide beach destination. **Six Senses Hideaway at Ninh Van Bay** (✆ **058/3522-222**) is the ultraluxurious resort accessible only by boat, set among lush forests on a secluded beach at the edge of a mountain range. It remains the top choice for luxury in Nha Trang.

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) remains the country's business nexus and is busy as ever. Food, entertainment, shopping—all things remain unrivaled in old Saigon, but some of the classic stays in the city have been redone so many times they've lost their charm. The **Park Hyatt Saigon** (✆ **08/3824-1234**) remains the best downtown choice. Online-dependants, however, should head straight for the **Caravelle** (✆ **08/3823-4999**), the first downtown five-star to offer free Internet access to hotel guests. Farther afield is the newly renovated **Mövenpick Saigon Hotel** (✆ **08/3844-9222**), formerly the Omni. Mövenpick's contemporary finish and new amenities make it a top choice for those who need a place to stay nearby the airport.

CAMBODIA

Cambodia remains a land of rugged mystery, a shadowy, war-ravaged country that has yet to turn the corner and is still developing. The ruling Cambodia People's Party, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, has consolidated its grip on power, while the fractured royalist party's vote collapsed in the last election. Legislation remains shockingly slow, and exploitation of natural resources is still endemic. Corruption remains king, and the country has remained unable to come to grips with its past. A tribunal that had for years been bogged down in red tape was finally underway for former leaders of the infamous Khmer Rouge, but on October 9, 2008, the first of its trials was again postponed indefinitely. The country has yet to rise to its potential, and people living in rural areas are as poor as ever, but Cambodia isn't an uninteresting destination.

The good news, though, is that **Siem Reap,** the gateway city to the famed temples of **Angkor,** is outpacing the rest of the nation. Once a dusty, crumbling town travelers had to put up with in order to view the awe-inspiring temples, Siem Reap has blossomed into a place worthy of a visit. Great investments have been put into airports and roads, police seem on their best behavior, and an entire bar and restaurant area has matured around the Old Market, where you can still have cheap, wholesome food at a place such as the **Khmer Kitchen Restaurant** (✆ **012/763-468**) or eat ice-cream sundaes in an air-conditioned, nonsmoking cafe, the **Blue Pumpkin** (✆ **063/963-574**), which makes excellent sandwiches to pack to the temples. For the best boutique experience, complete with modern decor, a quaint pool, and a cool rooftop restaurant, head to **Viroth's Hotel** (✆ **063/951-800**). In the next few years, the temple to see will be **Ta Prohm,** which was left much how the French found it: being swallowed by the jungle. Giant trees wrap their limbs

around man-made stone, putting humanity in a perspective different from that of other temples. Development is underway, though, to reclaim this temple, pull it back from the edge of the forest, and this will mean the loss of some of its magic. The time to go is now.

Phnom Penh, meanwhile, remains a fascinating capital in Southeast Asia. Not as dust-blown as it once was, Phnom Penh's growth is accelerating, and the word "sleepy" no longer applies here. More and more cars are choking the streets, and where once a visitor got around on the back of a motor cycle, he or she can now find a more placid ride in the chaos via **tuk-tuk,** a cushioned, shaded cart pulled behind a motor cycle. Rent one for a day and drive around the city, or see the important genocide sites, **Tuol Sleng** or **Choeung Ek,** which are grim reminders of Cambodia's past but really put the place into perspective. A less grisly attraction in Phnom Penh is the riverfront, along Sisowath Boulevard, which has sprouted numerous boutique hotels and fine restaurants in recent years. The best boutique hotel, however, is located next to the Royal Palace. The **Pavilion** (✆ **023/222-280**) took a former royal residence and created an oasis-like refuge complete with four-poster beds and an outdoor pool. While there, ask for an update on their **Waterfall Bay** project, a new resort set to open in 2010 on little-known Ko Rong Island.

The small beach town of **Kep** remains one of the country's best-kept secrets. In the past, a rough road and hard ride to the "Cambodian Riviera" kept many away, but the road is better now and a bus service brings passengers to Kep's doorstep. The beach is placid, if a little rustic, but numerous activities are available—from day trips to tropical islands to motor cycle rides through jungly mountains. These, combined with several quality places to stay—such as the **Knai Bang Chatt** (✆ **012/879-486**) and the **Veranda Natural Resort** (✆ **012/888-619**)—make Kep an imperative destination for anyone interested in seeing Cambodia beyond its ancient temples or shadowy capital.

SINGAPORE

From 2009 onward, Singapore's downtown will look like a completely different place. In November 2008, the city completed the Marina Barrage, a giant dam project at the mouth of Marina Bay, which transformed the bay into a freshwater reservoir. Located in the heart of the city, the bay will support watersports and entertainment, and will be surrounded by parks and promenades that will enhance Singapore's waterfront lifestyle feel.

A huge parcel of reclaimed land is currently being developed with wide avenues and futuristic infrastructure to support office towers, luxury high-rise condominiums, and a new financial center. An extension of the Shenton Way business district, the new area is being developed as a round-the-clock hub for working, living, and playing.

The centerpiece of the new downtown development is the **Marina Bay Sands,** Singapore's first casino, built by Las Vegas Sands, which has invested S$5 billion ($3.35 billion/£2.25 billion). The huge complex will also feature 110,000 sq. m (1,184,040 sq. ft.) of meeting and convention space, two 2,000-seat theaters, three hotel towers, an **ArtScience** museum, luxury retail outlets, dining venues in floating pavilions on the bay, plus innovative public spaces that include a rooftop park with a 360-degree city view, an ice-skating rink, and indoor canals. The complex will open in stages from late 2009.

Towering above the Marina Bay, the **Singapore Flyer** (p. 488), the world's largest observation wheel, has good views of all the construction.

There are also plans to join two landmark buildings within the Historic District, City Hall and the old Supreme Court

building, and convert them into a large exhibition space for contemporary arts in Singapore and Southeast Asia, with visiting exhibits from around the world. The new art gallery, alongside the **Arts House at the Old Parliament** (p. 485) and the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay, will turn the former colonial administrative heart of Singapore into a vibrant arts hub.

On Sentosa Island, a second casino complex, **Resorts World at Sentosa,** is being developed by Genting International and Star Cruises, who will invest S$5.2 billion ($3.5 billion/£2.3 billion) to build an enormous facility on Sentosa Island. Geared toward family and leisure activities, the casino will be supported by spa resort accommodations, restaurants, and bars, plus retail and entertainment outlets. Perhaps the most exciting part of the package will be the addition of **Universal Studios Singapore,** promised to be Asia's largest, with 22 attractions in themed "worlds," including "Journey to Madagascar," and a DreamWorks Digital Animation Studio. Also in the works is the **Quest Marine Life Park,** with the largest single marine tank in the world, and an interactive dolphin habitat. The **Equarius Water Park** will feature water rides and a maritime museum. Three amphitheaters will have international entertainment, including a resident show from the creators of **Cirque du Soleil.** Resorts World at Sentosa is scheduled to open in stages starting in 2010.

MALAYSIA

Like Singapore, Malaysia has also launched an observation wheel. First opened in Kuala Lumpur in 2007, the **Eye On Malaysia** (p. 559) reopened in its permanent location in Melaka, at the mouth of the Melaka River, in November 2008. The observation wheel sits on 1.6 hectares (4 acres) of land, which is currently being developed to include a **Light & Sound Giant Waterscreen Showcase,** a laser light show that uses a screen made from flowing water (opening in second quarter 2009) and the **Malaysian International Space Adventure (MISA),** with interactive education exhibits celebrating Malaysia's first astronaut in space (opening in third quarter 2009).

This guide also includes a few new hotels. The **Majestic Malacca** (p. 558) is a welcome addition to the Melaka hotel scene, where accommodations tend to be either bland international chain hotels or tiny guesthouses. The Majestic is a luxurious property built within a charming 1920s mansion located along the newly cleaned Melaka River.

BALI

The terrorist attacks of 2002 and 2005 did not keep the tourists away for long: The last 2 years have seen a record number of international visitors pass through the Ngurah Rai airport. Security remains tight, with bomb-sniffing dogs at many resorts and in downtown areas. Bali's outstanding service, beautiful landscape, and deluxe hotels at reasonable prices still make it a very appealing place to visit.

A top area full of world-class restaurants and deluxe hotels near—but not in—the action in downtown Kuta is **Seminyak.** The new **Anantara** (✆ **361/737773**) is on a sliver of oceanfront land right in the center of Seminyak's lively restaurant-and-nightlife scene. The oversize suites come with two bathtubs—one indoor and one outdoor, overlooking the ocean—and other luxe amenities such as an espresso machine, iPod, and a rooftop bar called **S.O.S. (Sunset on Six)** that's perfect for watching sunsets. If you're looking for more peace and quiet in a classy environment, travel a few miles north to the **Hotel Tugu** (✆ **361/731701**), with elegant antiques-clad rooms situated next to an excellent surfer's beach. If you're looking for more value for your money in this neighborhood, check out the boutique villas and rooms at the **Vivalavi** (✆ **361/8476028**), **Villa Ixora** (✆ **361/739390**), or **Desa Seni** (✆ **361/8446392**). Nearby

restaurants to visit include the new **Chandi** (✆ **361/731060**), serving modern Indonesian cuisine, **Khaima** (✆ **361/7423925**), serving Moroccan delights, and **Trattoria** (✆ **361/737082**) for home-style Italian pizza and pastas.

In the island's south is picturesque **Jimbaran Bay.** You'll find complete luxury and a kid-friendly atmosphere at the **Karma Kandara** (✆ **361/8482200**), aimed at hip, young families who haven't given up their decadent Ibiza-like party lifestyle. The resort boasts dramatic cliff-side views, villas with private plunge pools, and a completely private beach with the **Nammos Beach Club** bar and restaurant that's only reachable by a steep funicular ride.

Also in southern Bali, the resort area of **Nusa Dua** is home to several outstanding properties, including the new **St. Regis** (✆ **361/8478111**), situated around an enormous swimming lagoon that can be privately accessed from many of the villas. World-class meals at all of the resort's restaurants, including **Kayuputi,** and plenty of beachfront cabanas make this a perfect place to unwind. In the rice paddies of **Ubud** is possibly the best new resort in all of Bali: the **COMO Shambhala** (✆ **361/978888**), a resort that focuses on wellness programs suitable for guests of all walks of life. Gorgeous villas, individualized counseling sessions, and complimentary yoga and Pilates lessons are just some of the amenities at this 40-hectare (100-acre) resort situated on a steep hillside overlooking the Ayung River. Also check out **Uma Ubud** (✆ **361/972448**), a minimalist white set of boutique villas located right near central Ubud, and its dynamic restaurant **Kemiri.** The world-class French eatery **Mozaic** (✆ **361/975768**) has added cooking classes and a private chef's table. You can work off the calories by visiting the new Botanic Garden Ubud, which features an orchid greenhouse, tropical fruit trees, and an herbal medicine garden.

In Bali's east, the **Alam Asmara Dive Resort** (✆ **363/41929**) offers small bungalows near the sea, while the Alila Manggis' **Sea Salt** (✆ **363/41011**) restaurant and **Vincent's** (✆ **363/41368**) are the places to dine.

If you're seeking an even more remote environment, head to **Lombok,** where the new bohemian boutique **Hotel Tugu Lombok** (✆ **370/620111**) awaits. Nearby is the backpacker mecca of the Gili Islands, known for their stellar snorkeling and idyllic atmosphere.

1

The Best of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia offers a glimpse of the extraordinary, an explosion of colors, sounds, smells, textures, and life that will send you home with a wider vision of the human experience. In this chapter, we share our picks of the region's unrivaled highlights.

1 UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Making Merit** (Thailand & Laos): For centuries, the *sangha,* or monkhood, has lived off the donations of food and money from the community. The tradition continues to this day: Every morning, monks walk the streets around their temple not just to receive their daily food, but also to allow the giver to make merit. By giving food in this lifetime, Buddhists believe that they will not go hungry in the next lifetime. If you are interested in making merit this way, talk to your hotel's concierge. See chapters 4 and 5.
- **Staying in a Hill-Tribe Village near the China Border** (Laos): They still ask visitors, "Why do you come here, anyway?" in villages along the Nam Ha River in northern Laos. Thanks to the folks who run the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project, these vast tracts of pristine jungle won't be overrun by tourists anytime soon. Jungle trekking or river kayaking takes you through lush jungle terrain where you're likely to see monkeys and exotic birds. You'll arrive in villages where kayaks are still an oddity, and spend fun evenings around the fire communicating by charades or stick figures in a notebook. It's not about the villages being "pristine"; it's about the fact that your visit is part of a cultural exchange. See chapter 5.
- **Participating in a Baci Ceremony** (Laos): The Baci is a touching Lao ceremony used to say welcome or farewell and to honor achievements. Participants sit in a circle and receive group blessings, after which there is traditional dancing and *lao lao,* rice wine. It's a chance for the ultrafriendly Lao people to express their hospitality to you, their honored guest. See chapter 5.
- **Sailing the South China Sea** (Vietnam): Opportunities for watersports and sailing are many as you travel along Vietnam's coast. Most resorts have boats for rent, and Nha Trang is a good bet, as is the area off Mui Ne Beach near Phan Thiet, which is becoming a very popular kite-surfing and windsurfing spot. See chapter 6.
- **Waiting for the Magic Hour at Angkor Wat** (Cambodia): You'll want to plan your day around it, and temple aficionados all have their favorite spots; but whether from a hillside overlooking a glowing temple facade or from the heights of the main temple itself, with the horizon framed by the famed ancient towers, be sure to see an Angkor sunset. Sunrise is equally worth the early morning ride. See chapter 7.
- **Sipping a Singapore Sling in the Long Bar at the Raffles Hotel** (Singapore): Ah, the Long Bar, home of the Singapore

Sling. Sheltered by long timber shutters that close out the tropical sun, the air cooled by lazy punkahs (and air-conditioning), you can sit back in an old rattan chair and have a sarong waitress serve you sticky alcoholic creations while you toss back a few dainty crab cakes. It's fun to imagine the days when Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, or Charlie Chaplin would be sitting at the bar. Come in the afternoon, before the tourist rush. See chapter 8.

- **Walking the Streets of Georgetown** (Penang, Malaysia): Evidence of former British colonization and early Chinese, Indian, and Arab immigration is apparent in many major cities in Malaysia, but Penang has a special charm. In some ways, the city still operates the way it did half a century ago. Life hums in these streets, and for anyone who has witnessed the homogenization of Singapore or the modernization of Kuala Lumpur, Penang is a charming reminder of what life might have been like in these old outposts. See chapter 9.
- **Observing Open-Air Public Cremations** (Bali): Hindus believe that cremation is the only way a soul can be freed of its earthly body and travel to its next incarnation (or to enlightenment), so cremations are joyous occasions, full of floats and fanfare that can resemble a Mardi Gras parade. Complicated towers hold the body, carried aloft by cheering men. At the burning ground, the body is placed in a receptacle resembling a winged lion, a bull, or some other fabulous creature, and is set on fire. It's beautiful and awesome, a marvelous show of pageantry and faith, and yet a natural part of everyday life. Western visitors are welcomed. See chapter 10.

2 THE BEST TOWNS & VILLAGES

- **Chiang Saen** (Thailand): Crumbling 11th-century temples take you back to the birthplace of the Lanna Kingdom, one of Thailand's wealthiest and most influential. The nearby **Golden Triangle,** a notorious trade point for the international opium industry, has an opium museum and riverside views of Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. See chapter 4.
- **Luang Prabang** (Laos): This town, proclaimed a World Heritage Site by UNESCO for its glorious Buddhist temples, is also a charming retreat. Shady lanes are lined with French-style country homes that have been restored and converted to house cafes, galleries, shops, and some quaint guesthouses. The sunset over the lazy Mekong is the perfect end to a day spent in Luang Prabang. See chapter 5.
- **Hoi An** (Vietnam): The small size of Hoi An belies its importance to Vietnam; it was once a major trading port, with canals leading right up to merchants' quarters for easy delivery of goods. The canals are now peaceful streets, but little else has changed. Almost every building in central Hoi An is a historic Vietnamese-, Japanese-, and Chinese-influenced residence or meeting hall. See chapter 6.
- **Phnom Penh** (Cambodia): Few countries' capitals could be called quaint or fall under the category of a "town," and that's the very charm of this riverside burg. They say you either love it or hate it, that it's a place for expats and not tourists, but in a short stroll through the town center, you'll come across a unique mix. First you'll encounter a row of tourist cafes, the streets buzzing with

motorbikes and choked with dust, but turn the corner and you'll find a quiet alley, a row of colonials, a lone kid kicking a soccer ball, and a grim-looking grandmother breaking into a smile as you walk by. There's something special here. See chapter 7.

- **Ubud** (Bali): This is the cultural heart of Bali, bursting with art and greenery and some of the best food on the island. Even though it's dependent on tourism and is far from a typical Balinese village, you still get a sense of a real town, with real life going on around you. Ubud is the richest region in Bali for art production and, because of its central location, the town is the perfect base for exploring the rest of the island. See chapter 10.

3 THE BEST BEACHES

- **Chaweng Beach** (Ko Samui, Thailand): Chaweng is real fun in the sun. The beach itself is gorgeous, with bungalows nestled in the trees just beyond the sand. Behind the beach lies a small town full of life, from wonderful Thai and seafood eateries to shopping and wild nightlife options. See chapter 4.
- **Mai Khao Beach** (Phuket, Thailand): Look to your right—nobody. Look to your left—nobody. Just 17km (11 miles) of deserted beachfront, the longest beach on Phuket, with only one resort (which also happens to be one of the island's best) dotting its shores. Not a place to come if you want to party, though, since the only excitement occurs during the Songkran festival in April, when hundreds of baby sea turtles are released into the ocean. See chapter 4.
- **Mui Ne Beach** (Phan Thiet, Vietnam): Just a few hours from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Phan Thiet is the latest getaway in Vietnam. Oceanside development is in full swing here, and there are some great boutique resorts along the stunning white sands of Mui Ne Beach. Golfers will enjoy the Nick Faldo–designed course, the seafood here is good, and the town of Phan Thiet itself is an interesting little fishing port worth a wander. There are some great day trips to enormous remote dunes and smaller fishing villages. See chapter 6.
- **Tanjung Rhu** (Langkawi, Malaysia): This huge, secluded cove has one of the longest stretches of private beach ever. Wide with soft sand, the beach has cooling shady spots provided by palm trees overhead and beautiful deep-blue waters for good swimming. Best of all, there's only one resort here (and the beach is kept picture-perfect), so you won't have to elbow for space or suffer jet skis. See chapter 9.
- **Lombok** (off coast of Bali, Indonesia): The pure white-sand beaches of Lombok, with clear aqua-blue water lapping against them, are sometimes so private that you can have one all to yourself. And Lombok is just a short hop from neighboring Bali. See chapter 10.

4 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Exploring Phang Nga Bay** (Thailand): From the island of Phuket, sea-canoe operators guide visitors through the caves hidden deep inside the craggy island rocks of Phang-Nga Bay. Outside, the islands thrust up to the sky, their jagged edges laced with scattered trees. Lie flat in your canoe to slip

through the small cave openings, inside which you'll find magnificent chambers believed to have once hidden pirate operations. See chapter 4.

- **Caving & Kayaking in Vang Vieng** (Laos): Countless caves and caverns are hidden in the magnificent mountains surrounding Vang Vieng, a small village along the Nam Song River. Some of them are well known and some are barely on the map. Kayak tours on the Nam Song include some fun caves that you'll swim into; you can test your mettle on natural mud slides. Spend your days exploring and evenings talking about it over drinks in this laid-back little backpacker town. See chapter 5.
- **Sea Kayaking in Halong Bay** (Vietnam): The more than 3,000 arresting limestone karst formations rising out of Halong Bay's peaceful blue-green waters provide a natural obstacle course for paddling. Moving among them, you'll pass in and among intriguing grottoes and caverns. Nights are spent camping out in natural parks or on the deck of a mother ship. See chapter 6.
- **Trekking to Hill-Tribe Villages in Sapa** (Vietnam): Dressed in elaborate costumes of leggings, tunics, and headdresses, Hmong and Yao people (among other groups) gather to sell their weavings, fine dyed clothing, or crude but intricate metalwork in the central market. In fact, the town of Sapa is famed for an ephemeral "love market," where people from surrounding villages converge to find that special someone. A trip to Sapa means that the hill tribes come to you, but don't limit your trip to the town; be sure to get off into the countryside and trek in the shadow of Fansipan, the highest mountain in the region. Among lush terraced rice fields, you can visit many villages on even the shortest trek and experience different hill-tribe traditions and cultures. See chapter 6.
- **Jungle Trekking in Taman Negara** (Malaysia): With suitable options for all budgets, levels of comfort, and desired adventure, Malaysia's largest national park opens the wonders of primary rainforest and the creatures that dwell in it to everyone. From the canopy, walk high atop the forest on night watches for nocturnal life. This adventure is as stunning as it is informative. See chapter 9.
- **Hiking Gunung Agung** (Bali): Bali's highest mountain/volcano, Gunung Agung (3,014m/9,886 ft.), is sacred to the Balinese, whose traditions call it "the center of the world." Climbing the steaming peak is a serious trek that calls for a guide and proper supplies. Most hotels can arrange for it, but you will have to start out in the middle of the night or very early in the morning to make the top by sunrise. Nearby **Gunung Batur** is a less strenuous and no less rewarding half-day climb. See chapter 10.

5 THE BEST RELIGIOUS & HISTORICAL SITES

- **Grand Palace & Wat Phra Kaeo** (Bangkok, Thailand): These two places are number one on every travel itinerary to Bangkok, and rightly so. The palace is indeed grand, with mixtures of traditional Thai and European Victorian architecture. Wat Phra Kaeo, the royal temple that houses Thailand's revered and mysterious Emerald Buddha, is a small city in itself. See chapter 4.
- **Ayutthaya** (north of Bangkok, Thailand): This was the thriving capital of Siam that the first Europeans saw when they visited amazing Thailand. Ruling a rich and powerful kingdom of more than a million inhabitants, the monarchy supported the

arts, especially literature. As the city grew, international trade was encouraged. Today, all that remains are brick remnants of a grand palace and many temples that were sacked during the Burmese invasion. It's best to hire a guide who can walk you through. See chapter 4.

- **Sukhothai** (central Thailand): Founded in the 13th century, Sukhothai ("Dawn of Happiness") was the capital of the first unified state in what is today Thailand. Its borders grew to include parts of Burma to the west and extended as far as Luang Prabang to the east. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Sukhothai Historical Park encompasses the ruins of the former royal palace as well as more than 20 temples. Best enjoyed from the seat of a bicycle and in combination with a trip to nearby Si Satchanalai. See chapter 4.
- **Wat Xieng Thong** (Luang Prabang, Laos): The glittering Xieng Thong, built in 1560, sits grandly on a peninsula jutting into the Mekong River. The facades of two of its buildings are covered by glittering glass mosaics; another building contains an ornate chariot with the heads of seven dragons and the remains of a king. About a dozen English-speaking monks roam the premises; all are excellent conversationalists. See chapter 5.
- **Plain of Jars** (Xieng Khouang, Laos): How did hundreds of huge stone urns, some measuring 2.7m tall (9 ft.), come to be placed on a few meadows in northern Laos? No one really knows, and that's what's fun here. The most prevalent explanation is that the urns were made by prehistoric folks in the area about 2,000 years ago to be used as sarcophagi, but there's lots of room for conjecture. See chapter 5.
- **Tomb of Khai Dinh** (Hue, Vietnam): Khai Dinh was an egotistical, eccentric emperor who was bad for the people of Vietnam but great for the tomb he left behind. A gaudy mix of Gothic, baroque, and classical Chinese architecture, the exterior is remarkable. The stunning interior is completely covered with intricate glass and ceramic mosaic work. See chapter 6.
- **Cao Dai Holy See Temple** (Tay Ninh, north of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam): This is the spiritual home base of the Cao Dai religion, a faith characterized by philosophical inclusion and influence gathered from all beliefs, including the world's great scientists and humanitarians. Its headquarters is like a fantasyland of colored mosaic and elaborate painting. Followers are dressed in colorful robes during the picturesque daily procession. It's quite unique. See chapter 6.
- **Angkor Wat** (Cambodia): One of the world's man-made wonders, Angkor Wat is the Disneyland of temples in Asia. This ancient city was known to the Western world only in myth until it was rediscovered and hacked free of jungle overgrowth in the late 1800s. The magnificent temples are arrayed over a 97-sq.-km (37-sq.-mile) compound that dates from the rise and fall of the mighty Angkor civilization (a.d. 802–1295). See chapter 7.
- **Thian Hock Keng Temple** (Singapore): One of Singapore's oldest Chinese temples, it is a fascinating testimony to Chinese Buddhism combined with traditional Confucian beliefs and natural Taoist principles. See chapter 8.
- **Jame Mosque** (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia): Built at the central point of the city, this is one of the oldest mosques in Kuala Lumpur. It is the heart of Malay Islam. See chapter 9.
- **Jalan Tokong** (Melaka, Malaysia): This street, in the historic heart of the city, has a Malay mosque, a Chinese temple, and a Hindu temple living peacefully side by side—the perfect example of how the many foreign religions that came to Southeast Asia shaped its communities and learned to coexist in harmony. See chapter 9.

- **Uluwatu** (Bali): This dramatic cliff-side temple overlooks the crashing waves of Bali's southern beaches. See chapter 10.
- **Basakih Temple** (Bali): Built in homage of Gunung Agung, the island's feisty, smoke-belching creator, the Basakih Temple does justice to the awe and grandeur of the Balinese creation myths surrounding the volcano. The spires of individual family shrines and temples are something like Chinese pagodas, and the place is always abuzz with local worshipers. You're likely to get pulled into a ceremony here. See chapter 10.

6 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **National Museum** (Bangkok, Thailand): From prehistory to recent events, this museum—the former palace of the brother of King Rama I—answers many questions about Thai history and culture through the ages. See chapter 4.
- **Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts** (Hanoi, Vietnam): This large colonial house has a nice collection of newer works and historic pieces. See chapter 6.
- **Cham Museum** (Danang, Vietnam): This open-air colonial structure houses the largest collection of Cham sculpture in the world. Not only are relics of this ancient Hindu-inspired culture rare, but the religious artwork itself—more than 300 pieces of sandstone—is also voluptuous, captivating, and intense. See chapter 6.
- **National Museum** (Phnom Penh, Cambodia): Don't miss this repository for the statues and relief sculpture that have been recovered from the Angkor temples and other ancient sites throughout Cambodia. See chapter 7.
- **Tuol Sleng, Museum of Genocide** (Phnom Penh, Cambodia): Be warned that a visit here is quite intense—too much for some. The museum is the shell of Cambodia's largest prison from 1975 to 1979, when the entire country was turned into a concentration camp. See chapter 7.
- **Peranakan Museum** (Singapore): This brand-new display is the only museum in the world solely devoted to Peranakan culture, a subculture of intermarriage that is unique to Southeast Asia. See chapter 8.

7 THE BEST FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

- **Songkran** (Thailand): Every year from April 13 to April 15, Thais welcome the new year (according to their calendar). Because Songkran falls in the middle of the hottest season in an already hot country, how do you think people celebrate? Every Thai heads out into the streets with water guns and buckets of ice water—plus handfuls of talcum powder, just to add to the mess—and spends the next 3 days soaking one another—and *you.* Foreigners are especially favorite targets. See chapter 4.
- **Dragon Boat Races** (Laos): Celebrating the end of Buddhist Lent, dragon boat races are held in every riverside town in Laos (and that's most towns, really). See chapter 5.
- **That Luang Festival** (Vientiane, Laos): In early November, thousands of Buddhist followers from all over the country, and even a few neighboring countries, converge on the spectacular That Luang temple in Vientiane. See chapter 5.
- **Chinese New Year** (Singapore): If you're in Southeast Asia around the end

of January or the beginning of February, hop up to Hong Kong or down to Singapore for the festivities. See chapter 8.

- **Thaipusam** (Singapore & Malaysia): Around the end of January and the beginning of February, Hindus celebrate Thaipusam. Men give thanks for prayers answered by carrying *kavadi,* huge steel racks attached to their bodies with skewers piercing the skin. See chapters 8 and 9.

8 THE BEST RESORTS & LUXURY HOTELS

- **The Oriental, Bangkok** (Bangkok, Thailand): The original address in Thailand, the Oriental has seen modernization detract from its charms of yesterday, but there's still ambience all around. See p. 79.
- **JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** (Phuket, Thailand): One of the most relaxing resorts in Thailand, the JW Marriott is set on a secluded 17km (11-mile) stretch of white-sand beach far from the debauchery and din of Patong. An ideal getaway. See p. 164.
- **Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai** (Chiang Mai, Thailand): Set in the hills of the Mae Rim Valley north of Chiang Mai, luxurious Lanna-style pavilions overlook working terraced rice paddies. Each suite has its own *sala* from which to admire the grounds and surrounding hills. See p. 190.
- **La Résidence Phou Vao** (Luang Prabang, Laos): Lording it over the town in boutique luxury, the gardens and large suites of the Phou Vao (formerly the Pansea) are comfortable, and the atmosphere is done to a T. This is typical of other Orient Express properties in the region. See p. 242.
- **Settha Palace Hotel** (Vientiane, Laos): Once the address of note for visitors to the French colony, the Settha Palace only recently returned from obscurity and is now one of the finest hotels in the region. It's a nice marriage of colonial elegance and modern comfort. See p. 227.
- **Sofitel Metropole Hanoi** (Hanoi, Vietnam): The history of the Metropole, one of the country's premier grande dames, tells the history of the last tumultuous century in Vietnam. Though everything is luxurious and comfortable and you're in a prime downtown location, you'll certainly feel like you've walked into old Indochina. See p. 286.
- **Six Senses Hideaway at Ninh Van Bay** (Nha Trang, Vietnam): Earth-toned private villas are secreted away in a secluded cove near Nha Trang that can only be reached by boat. Set into the forested beach or rocky coast, and each with a private pool, the Hideaway's villas portend good things for Vietnam's luxury getaways. Nothing else in the country comes close. Yet. See p. 341.
- **Sofitel Dalat Palace** (Dalat, Vietnam): It's real old-world opulence in the king's former castle in Vietnam's central highlands. Private spaces are decorated in a cool colonial barroque style, while service is, in short, kingly. See p. 350.
- **The Nam Hai** (Hoi An, Vietnam): The first glimpse of the infinity pools disappearing into the ocean horizon will leave you breathless. This stylish new resort, perched on a stretch of private beach, is an absolute must for those seeking a romantic getaway or a pampered, luxurious vacation. See p. 326.
- **Amansara** (Siem Reap, Cambodia): If there's one place to splurge on a jaunt through Southeast Asia, this is the one. Built around former King Sihanouk's private guesthouse, the Amansara is flawless in detail and service, making it a perfect base of operations for exploring the temples of Angkor. See p. 419.

- **Raffles Hotel** (Singapore): For old-world opulence, Raffles is second to none. This is a pure fantasy of the days when tigers still lurked around the perimeters. See p. 455.
- **Shangri-La Hotel** (Singapore): The Shang is a meticulously landscaped tropical oasis, with lush garden views from every angle. Three individual wings give you a choice of accommodations styles: urban contemporary, natural resort, and Asian opulence. See p. 460.
- **Hilton Kuala Lumpur** (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia): The rooms feel like suites, decorated in slickety-slick contempo style with the latest entertainment and IT built in—even in the bathrooms. See p. 545.
- **Four Seasons Langkawi** (Langkawi, Malaysia): This resort is an exotic Moorish paradise on the most gorgeous beach in Malaysia. Rooms and public areas drip with the ambience of the *Arabian Nights.* Three words: To. Die. For. See p. 573.
- **Four Seasons Resort at Jimbaran Bay** (Jimbaran, Bali): With its individual bungalows and plunge pools overlooking the blue sea and its famous Four Seasons pampering, this is one of the great hotels in the world. See p. 614.
- **COMO Shambhala** (Ubud, Bali): This resort is so self-confident that it calls itself "The Estate"—and it's a title that's well-earned. With 41 hectares (100 acres) of sculpted grounds and wild jungle, top-notch detox and wellness programs steered by qualified specialists, and elegant rooms with antique touches, you may never want to leave. See p. 621.
- **Chedi Club at Tanah Gajah** (Ubud, Bali): The private villas offer plunge pools, indoor and outdoor Bose speaker systems, huge outdoor bathtubs, butlers that cater to your every demand, and plenty of complimentary services that make other hotels seem stingy. See p. 620.

9 THE BEST HOTEL BARGAINS

- **Majestic Grande** (Bangkok, Thailand): The Majestic could rightly be called either a small-scale luxury hotel or a bloated boutique hotel. It's in a prime spot off bustling Sukhumvit, with rooms going for half the price of the large chains. See p. 88.
- **Tamarind Village** (Chiang Mai, Thailand): If you're going to travel on a budget, do it with style—and style is what Tamarind Village has wrapped up in its quiet courtyard in the middle of Old Town. Rooms are new and rather spartan in concrete and rattan, but everything is tiptop. See p. 188.
- **Day Inn Hotel** (Vientiane, Laos): There's a comfortable, laid-back feel here, and this many long-stay visitors can't be wrong. You'll find rooms for $32 (£18). See p. 229.
- **Spring Hotel** (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam): Not especially luxurious, but rooms in this privately owned downtown property (one of few nongovernmental places in Saigon) start at $36 (£20). It's light on amenities but very comfortable, convenient, and friendly. See p. 374.
- **Goldiana** (Phnom Penh, Cambodia): It's no-frills, but friendly and cheap, set in a quiet neighborhood south of the town center. The hotel is popular with long-staying visitors and NGO workers. See p. 406.
- **Perak Hotel** (Singapore): A homey budget gem on the edge of Little India,

where narrow back alleys are filled with excellent food, great shopping, convenient facilities for backpackers, and tons of cultural charm. See p. 457.

- **Swiss-Inn** (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia): Right in the center of Kuala Lumpur's bustling Chinatown, the Swiss-Inn is the perennial favorite for travelers here. A comfortable choice, plus it's so close to everything. See p. 547.
- **Heeren House** (Melaka, Malaysia): Bargain or no bargain, this boutique hotel in the heart of the old city is the place to stay in Melaka if you want to really get a feel for the local atmosphere. See p. 556.
- **Telang Usan Hotel** (Kuching, Malaysia): An informal place, Telang Usan is homey and quaint, and within walking distance of many major attractions in Kuching. See p. 580.
- **The *Losmen* (Homestays) of Bali:** These small-time accommodations will give you a large, comfortable (though no-frills) room or bungalow with a big, often fancy breakfast for about $5 a night for two. See chapter 10.
- **Alila Manggis and Alila Ubud** (Bali). These twin resorts have nearly all the amenities of luxury properties but at rates ranging from $100 to $150 (£67–£100) per night. You'll have to put up with slightly cramped rooms, but in return you'll get beautiful common areas, stellar service, excellent food, and expert spa treatments. And just in case you don't want to sit by the beautiful infinity pool at the Ubud property, the Alila offers a daily activity schedule with cooking classes, treks, and cultural lessons. See p. 622.

10 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Street Food** (Bangkok, Thailand): On every street, down every alley, you'll find someone setting up a cart with an umbrella. Noodles, salads, and satay are favorites, and some hawkers set up tables and stools on the side walk for you to take a load off. See chapter 4.
- **Kua Lao** (Vientiane, Laos): Kua Lao serves traditional Lao cuisine in a restored colonial—it's the premier Lao restaurant in the country. The extensive menu goes on for pages. See p. 231.
- ***Pho*** (Vietnam): Don't leave the country without sampling one, if not many, bowls of this delicate noodle soup, made with vermicelli (thin rice noodles), chicken *(ga)* or beef *(bo),* and several fresh accompaniments, according to the chef's whim or local flavor. See chapter 6.
- **Ngon Restaurant** (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam): It's loud and busy, but diners have their choice of food from the many authentic street stalls that line the central courtyard. Locals eat here; and though there is an English menu, go with a Vietnamese friend or ask for a recommendation from the friendly (but always busy) staff. See p. 378.
- **Hawker Centers** (Singapore): Think of them as shopping malls for food—great food. Walk around and select anything you want as it's prepared right before your eyes. See chapter 8.
- **Gurney Drive Food Stalls** (Penang, Malaysia): Penang is king for offering a variety of Asian cuisines, from Chinese to Malay, Indian, and everything else in between. See p. 567.
- ***Warungs*** (Bali): The Balinese equivalent of the greasy-spoon diner in America, *warungs* can be found on every street corner. The food can be authentic, delicious, and cheap. See chapter 10.

11 THE BEST MARKETS

- **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (Bangkok, Thailand): You can easily get lost and certainly spend hours wandering this labyrinth. Don't buy anything until you spend at least a half-day wandering down the endless aisles eyeballing the multitude of merchandise available. See chapter 4.
- **Night Bazaar** (Chiang Mai, Thailand): Most of those gorgeous handicrafts you find all over Thailand are made in the north, and at Chiang Mai's sprawling Night Bazaar, you'll find the widest selection and best quality. See chapter 4.
- **Morning Market** (Vientiane, Laos): Laos's famous market is three huge buildings with traditional tiered roofs. Silver handicrafts, fabrics, jewelry, electronics, books, and more occupy each building's several floors. The proprietors are friendly, gentle bargainers. See chapter 5.
- **Central Market** (Hoi An, Vietnam): On the banks of the busy Perfume River lies this entire city block of narrow, roofed aisles. Products of every description are for sale inside: handicrafts, household items, and services such as facials and massages. On the outskirts, an entire warehouse is devoted to silk and silk tailoring. See chapter 6.
- **Central Market** (Phnom Penh, Cambodia): This is where it all happens in Phnom Penh. The main building is a massive Art Deco rotunda with wings extending in all directions. It's an anthill of activity on any given day, and you can get some interesting bargains and unique finds. See chapter 7.
- **Arab Street** (Singapore): Sure, Singapore is a shopper's paradise, but it needs more places like Arab Street, where small shops lining the street sell everything from textiles to handicrafts. Bargaining is welcome. See chapter 8.
- **Central Market** (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia): This is one-stop shopping for all the rich arts and handicrafts Malaysia produces—and it's air-conditioned, too. See chapter 9.

Tips Everything Has a Price: Haggling

Prices are never marked in the small shops and at street vendors in Southeast Asia. You must bargain. The most important thing to remember when bargaining is to keep a friendly, good-natured banter between you and the seller. Before you start out, it's good to have some idea of how much your purchase is worth, to give you a base point for negotiation. A simple "How much?" is the place to start, to which the vendor will reply with the top price. Check at a few vendors before negotiating, and never accept the first price. Try a smile and ask, "Is that your best price?" Vendors will laughingly ask for your counteroffer. Knock the price down about 50%—they'll look shocked, but it's a starting point for bidding. Just remember to smile and be friendly, and remain willing to walk away (or fake it). ***Caveat:*** If it's a larger, more expensive item, don't get into major bargaining unless you're serious about buying. If the shopkeeper agrees on what you say you're willing to pay, it's considered rude not to make the purchase.

12 THE BEST SHOPPING BARGAINS

- **Antiques** (Thailand): Before you head out on vacation, visit some Asian galleries in your home country and take a look at the prices of the items you like. Once you're here, you'll be amazed at how little these things really cost. Most places will be glad to pack and ship purchases for you, and you'll still come out ahead. See chapter 4.
- **Tailored Silk Suits** (Thailand; also Hanoi, Hoi An, and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam): For a fraction of what you'd pay at home, you can have a lined silk (or wool) suit tailored in a day or less, including a fitting or two. Bring pictures of your favorite designer outfits for a clever copy, and pick up an empty suitcase or two for the trip home. See chapters 4 and 6.
- **Hand-Woven Textiles** (Laos): The Laos hand-weave textured fabrics piece by piece on primitive wooden looms. Such painstaking work costs more than a few dollars, but, ranging from sophisticated silk to gaily colored ethnic prints, the designs are pure art and uniquely Laotian. See chapter 5.
- **Silver or Lacquer Handicrafts** (Vietnam): The workmanship is tops and the prices low throughout Vietnam, particularly for lacquerware. Bargain hard and make sure that the silver is genuine. See chapter 6.
- **Silver Filigree Jewelry** (Malaysia): Silver is worked into detailed filigree jewelry designs to make brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and other fine jewelry. See chapter 9.
- **Pewter** (Malaysia): Malaysia is the home of Selangor Pewter, one of the largest pewter manufacturers in the world. Its many showrooms have all sorts of items to choose from. See chapter 9.
- **Fabric & Woodcarvings** (Bali): Even with the "rich man's tax" for tourists in Bali, just about anything you buy on the island is a bargain compared with the same stuff back home. Commissioned fabric and woodcarvings are a particularly good deal. See chapter 10.

13 THE HOTTEST NIGHTLIFE

- **Patpong** (Bangkok, Thailand): Yes, *that* Patpong. If go-go bars and sex shows aren't your style, you'll still find plenty to do. After you're finished shopping in the crowded Night Market, you'll see plenty of restaurants, pubs, and discos that cater to folks who prefer more traditional nightlife. See chapter 4.
- **Disco Lives!** (Laos): Go to a disco . . . any disco. In the basement of Vientiane's Lao Plaza Hotel is a reasonable big-city facsimile, but ask around in any small town for what's going on. See chapter 5.
- **Ho Chi Minh City** (Vietnam): From the tawdry to the socialite scene, you'll find it in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Most evenings begin with an elegant (but very reasonable) French or Vietnamese dinner; then it's barhopping time in the compact downtown, mingling with trendy locals and fun-loving expats. See chapter 6.
- **Singapore:** Nightlife is becoming increasingly sophisticated in Singapore, where locals have more money for recreation and fun. Take the time to choose the place that suits your personality. See chapter 8.

- **Bangsar** (near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia): Folks in Kuala Lumpur know to go to Bangsar for nighttime excitement. A couple of blocks of concentrated restaurants, cafes, discos, pubs, and wine bars will tickle any fancy. See chapter 9.
- **Seminyak (Bali):** Certain nightclubs such as Paparazzi and Bacio don't even get going until 2am, but there are plenty of options including Living Room and Hu'u Bar to keep you busy until then. See chapter 10.

2

Introducing Southeast Asia

While the rest of the world's continents fit into nice, tidy compartments, the nations that make up Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—often have more differences than similarities. Diverse geographical features, histories, religious and cultural heritages, economies, and politics across the region mean that the shortest journey offers cross-cultural comparison and new perspective.

Safety is a primary concern for travelers these days, and while it is important to stay updated on internal issues in any given country and to steer clear of any hot spots, the adventurous tourist paths through this vibrant region are ripe for exploration and replete with mystery, beauty, and ancient culture and wisdom.

1 THE REGION TODAY

Geographically, Southeast Asia is diverse and stunning. The lush tropical rainforests of peninsular Malaysia and Borneo are some of the oldest in the world. Beautiful islands and beaches are many, including large resort areas such as Thailand's Phuket or Indonesia's Bali, plus countless other gorgeous isles, atolls, and sandy strips that are relatively unexploited. Divers and snorkelers flock from around the world for stunning coral reefs bursting with colorful life in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. You can find adventures in the wild while jungle trekking, sea and river kayaking, or visiting ethnic villages and sacred peaks.

Southeast Asia is also a cultural melting pot, a crossroads of influences from China, south Asia, and Tibet. Consider the Sri Lankans, who transplanted Theravada Buddhism, with its serene and orthodox ways, from Myanmar to Thailand and Laos. Or the Indian traders, who brought ancient Hinduism to Cambodia, influencing the architecture of the magical city of Angkor. Or the Hindus who settled on Bali, mixing their dogma with local animism to create a completely unique sect. Meanwhile, seafaring Arab merchants imported Islam to coastal areas of Malaysia and Indonesia, adding another interesting facet to the region. In Vietnam, the only Southeast Asian nation to fall directly under the control of past Chinese empires, China's cultural influences are still strong. And, on top of that, Europeans from the late 1400s onward imported Western culture to cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, and Melaka; the European colonial imprint is still visible in the architecture and cuisine of most countries in the region. Crossing an international border in Southeast Asia is stepping into another world.

Economic and political developments have changed the face of tourism in the region. While cosmopolitan stops such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok guarantee the best luxury hotels, finest dining, and most refined cultural attractions, up-and-coming cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and Chiang Mai promise cultural curiosities around every street corner as they struggle to balance

traditional customs with modern development. Thailand's 3 decades of tourism development have created very familiar facilities for travelers, for example, but those looking for a more do-wn-and-dirty experience can head off to nearby Cambodia or Laos, countries still off the beaten path of most tourist agendas. For every luxurious Bali, there's a laid-back Tioman Island (Malaysia). For every busy Bangkok, there's a charming Luang Prabang (Laos).

It is important, of course, to talk about those Southeast Asian nations that have political or safety concerns, and the sections that follow discuss political turmoil in more detail. Steer clear of any sectarian or political tension, and know that the relative stability of many countries in Southeast Asia is rather short-lived; flash political upheavals are not uncommon. Refer to your country's overseas travel bureau or to the U.S. State Department (click "Travel Warnings" at www.travel.state.gov) to learn about current travel warnings in the area.

THAILAND

Each year, Thailand sees more international travelers than any of its neighbors, enticing everyone from luxury vacationers to young shoestring backpackers, Japanese junkets, and European group tours. You'll meet young professionals on hiatus, naive tourists prowling for that "One Night in Bangkok," and soul-searchers hanging around for the Buddhist dharma and Asian hospitality. Many trips to Southeast Asia either start here or end up here, and it is a good orientation.

Travelers usually arrive in **Bangkok,** staying for a few days to take in the city's bizarre mix of royal palaces and skyscrapers, pious monks amid rush-hour commuters, and sidewalk noodle vendors serving bankers in suits. That's not to mention the city's nightlife, with that seedy element that made the city infamous. Heading south, find the legendary beaches and resorts of **Phuket** island; **Ko Samui,** in the Gulf of Thailand, is a comparable alternative. Another attraction, the northern hills around **Chiang Mai,** presents a world of adventure trekking and tribal culture along well-worn—but well-worth-it—travel paths. Throughout the country, you'll have opportunities for **outdoor adventure** and **extreme sports,** organized by very professional firms that you can count on for safety and reliability.

And at the end of the day, there's that unbeatable taste of **Thai cuisine**—tangy soups, hearty coconut curries, and the freshest seafood.

LAOS

Travelers who complain that Thailand has become too touristy can look to Laos. Here is a country where foreigners are still greeted as gracious guests rather than as cash cows. Rarely will you find tacky souvenir stalls or tourist kitsch—just quiet towns with laid-back markets, townsfolk carrying on their trades, and farmers tending to their chores. Life is set to the pace of Buddhism, tranquillity and compassion the hallmarks, and the people are very kind and welcoming.

Some people fear that Laos will follow Thailand's accelerated development model, that the ethnic villages in the north will be turned into safari parks and the country's beautiful temples transformed into theme attractions. But the infrastructure of this developing nation won't yet support that, and Lao people are in no rush to cash in on the nation's peacefulness.

For a capital city, **Vientiane** is startlingly parochial. With every other building dedicated to an international development agency, it's an eye-opening reminder that Laos is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. Next stop is **Luang Prabang,** UNESCO World Heritage Site, a paradise of gorgeous Buddhist temples—dozens of them amid shady streets that lead to the Mekong River. If you have time, **Xieng Khouang,** east of Vientiane, is the home of

Southeast Asia's Stonehenge, the **Plain of Jars,** huge mysterious stone monoliths that have somehow survived bombs and guerrilla insurgents. **Ecotourism** is growing rapidly, and some new and interesting avenues into the Lao jungle and rivers connect remote ethnic villages (especially in the north).

VIETNAM

If the thought of Vietnam stirs flashbacks of televised war coverage or scenes from dark movies, guess again. One of the fastest-growing destinations in the region also happens to be one of the most beautiful, friendliest, and most convenient places to travel.

Vietnam's major destinations fall in a line, and most visitors choose to travel from north to south, starting in Hanoi and ending in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), or vice versa. Convenient tourist buses connect the main coastal stops, and there are increasing options for individual travelers as well.

In the south, **Ho Chi Minh City,** or **Saigon,** is the gateway to the beautiful **Mekong Delta** region. Heading north, you'll pass through **Dalat,** a hill station in the cool mountains, and then on to **Nha Trang,** an emerging seaside getaway. Farther north, **Hoi An** is one of the region's most charming villages and a picturesque labyrinth of cobblestone streets, historic buildings, and lots of shopping. Still farther, the former capital city at **Hue** is filled with many architectural gems of Chinese and European influence. The cultural amalgam is best defined in **Hanoi,** where Vietnamese, French, and Chinese cultures collide. From here, head east to see gorgeous **Halong Bay,** with hundreds of craggy rock formations jutting straight up from the sea; or travel to the far north to **Sapa,** where you visit Vietnam's hill-tribe people in the mountains that divide northern Vietnam from China.

CAMBODIA

It wasn't long ago that Cambodia was off the map, a land plagued by general lawlessness and banditry as the result of years of strife. In recent times, visitors have braved the remnants of the country's chaos and, by hook or by crook, made their way to Siem Reap and Southeast Asia's premier cultural attraction, **Angkor Wat,** the magnificent temple ruins of the mighty Angkor civilization of a.d. 800 to 1200.

The good news is that, though it will take years to catch up economically with its growing neighbors, Cambodia is on the mend. It will take at least a few generations to heal after the tragic events of the mid-1970s, when the entire country was turned into a concentration camp under Pol Pot, but Cambodia is now looking to the future. Bolstered by international humanitarian aid organizations, the country is enjoying a protracted period of peace not seen in many years. **Phnom Penh,** the capital, and **Siem Reap,** the access village for the Angkor temples, are safe, and the countryside is open to more adventurous travelers ready to brave the rough roads and basic amenities and accommodations. Many still limit their trip in Cambodia to the temples of Angkor, however. Convenient direct flights from the larger cities throughout the region simplify the process.

It's important to remember that the country is still littered with UXO, unexploded ordnance, including dormant bombs and land mines. In the rural areas, it's important to stay on well-worn trails and, farther afield, to go with a knowledgeable guide. After a peaceful election in 2003, the situation in Phnom Penh is stable, but visitors should stay informed before going, as the country has a history of flash political upheaval.

SINGAPORE

All of Southeast Asia's cultures seem to converge on Singapore, making it perhaps

one of the best places to begin your exploration of the region. Excellent **museums** explore Asian civilizations, Southeast Asian art, and even World War II history. The city's hundreds of restaurants provide a wealth of choices in terms of **cuisine,** offering a glimpse of many regional specialties in one stop. And some of the best regional **fine arts, crafts,** and **antiques** end up in Singapore showrooms.

Singapore gets trashed regularly by complaints that it is too Western, too modern, too sanitary—too Disneyland. Walk the streets of **Chinatown, Little India,** and the Malay Muslim area at **Kampong Glam,** and you can see where the buildings have been renovated and many former inhabitants have retired from traditional crafts. But some of these places have a few secrets left that are very rewarding if you are observant. Over the past 200 years, Singapore has reinvented itself from many contributing cultures. If you consider the country today, you'll realize it is still keeping up that tradition.

MALAYSIA

Possibly one of the most overlooked countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is one of our favorites for one very special reason: It's not Thailand. After so much time spent traveling around Thailand listening to every hawker yell, "Hello! Special for you!" and every backpacker bragging about $5 roach-infested guesthouses, we look forward to Malaysia just to escape the tourism industry. Beaches on the islands of **Langkawi** and **Sabah** are just as beautiful

Myanmar (Burma): To Go or Not to Go?

In preparing this guide, we were confronted with problematic political realities in Myanmar—realities that made us question the advisability of sending readers there. The brutality and unfairness of the military government of Myanmar have been met with sanctions and embargoes from the international community. Political leaders such as the resilient Aung San Suu Kyi are being punished, and any dissent is met with house arrest and prison.

Since the early 1990s, the junta has encouraged tourism, and a visit to Myanmar is in fact a unique glimpse into rich Buddhist tradition, ancient culture, and stunning natural beauty. But while some encourage tourism and believe that Western visitors give voice to the troubles of Burma, others shout for a moratorium on tourism to this troubled land, saying that visitors' dollars subsidize and support tyranny.

Because of the precarious political climate in Myanmar, we've decided to exclude the country from this edition. Those not so easily dissuaded, however, can find more information on the subject at the **Burma Project at the Open Society Institute** (www.soros.org/burma) or at www.burmadebate.org. If you do decide to go to Myanmar, we suggest sticking with a reputable international tour operator. Good regional providers include **Diethelm Travel** (1 Inya Rd., Kamayut Township; ✆ **951/527-110** or 951/527-117; fax 951/527-135; www.diethelm-travel.com) and **Exotissimo Travel** (#0303 Sakura Tower, 339 Bogyoke Aung San St., Kyauktada Township, Yangon; ✆ **951/255-427** or 951/255-388; fax 951/255-428; myanmar@exotissimo.com).

as Thailand's, and resorts here are equally as fine. The quaint British colonial influences at **Penang, Malacca,** and **Kuching** (Sarawak) add to the beauty, as do the mysterious Arab-Islamic influences all over the country. That's not to mention an endless number of **outdoor adventures,** from mountain climbing to jungle trekking to scuba diving—in fact, the rainforest here is far superior.

Why is Malaysia so underestimated? To be honest, after experiencing the relative "freedom" and tolerance of Thai culture, many travelers find Malaysian culture too strict and prohibitive. We think it's a fair trade—in Thailand, when we talk to Thai people, we're often treated like tourists with fat wallets. In Malaysia, when we meet locals, we end up having interesting conversations and cherished personal experiences. And we don't have to suffer through blatant prostitution and drug abuse—the sad, sleazy side of the Thai tourism industry.

A word of caution: On April 23, 2000, a group of tourists was kidnapped from the diving resort at Sipadan Island, off the east coast of Sabah (Malaysian Borneo). Abu Sayyaf, the Filipino Muslim separatists who were responsible for the incident, still remain at large in the southern islands of the Philippines close to Borneo. Exercise caution when traveling to this area.

BALI (INDONESIA)

Memories of the 2002 and 2005 bombings in southern Bali are imprinted on our collective image of the island, and no doubt the whole world is familiar with Indonesia's history of civil unrest: ethnic and religious conflict, the struggle for independence in East Timor and now Aceh, and anti-Western bombings and riots in Jakarta. Yet tourism is on the upswing in Bali, and those who visit are taking advantage of great hotel deals on an island well known for spectacular beaches, lush rice paddies, and welcoming people.

Until the bombings, Bali was the one safe haven, an enclave of upscale resorts separate from troubles on the larger islands of Indonesia. Now, in the wake of the bombings, Bali struggles to regain its international allure. The **beaches** remain the stuff of legend, supporting dreamy resorts that cater to anyone from families to escapist honeymooners and well-heeled paradise seekers. **Watersports** enthusiasts flock to Bali for surfing, snorkeling, scuba diving, and swimming as well as kite surfing and windsurfing. Those who can pull themselves away from the seaside can venture into villages lively with local smiles and markets packed with eye-boggling handicrafts and treasures, or take off into the jungle or up among high volcanic peaks for rigorous trekking. The town of **Ubud** is set among delightful Hindu temples and gorgeous mountain scenery—famed for its terraced rice fields—and supports a community of local and expat artists. Bali still has much to offer, and the friendly Balinese islanders are eager to see a return of the Western visitors who've brought so much to this magical isle.

2 A SOUTHEAST ASIAN CULTURAL PRIMER

The diverse ethnic groups in the region, from socialite city dwellers to remote enclaves of subsistence farmers, have unique histories, cultural practices, and religions. The region is a cornucopia of cultures that have intertwined and adopted various elements, beliefs, and practices from one another.

THAILAND

Over centuries, migrating cultures have blended to create what is known as "Thai" today. Early waves of southern Chinese migrants combined with Mon peoples from Burma, Khmers from Cambodia, Malays, and Lao people—it is said that Thailand's King Rama I could trace ancestry to all

Buddha & Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Born **Siddhartha Gautama Buddha** in the year 563 B.C., the historical Buddha was an Indian prince. A passing sage predicted the child's future as a great holy man, and his father, who wanted him to be a great king, kept him sheltered from suffering behind palace walls. As a child, he knew nothing of sickness and death. He married, had children, and lived a carefree life, though one plagued by a certain soul sickness and discontent. His journey began when he first spied a sick man and a corpse. Renouncing his princely cloaks, he concluded that life is suffering. Resolving to search for relief from earthly pain, he went into the forest and lived there for many years as a solitary ascetic, ultimately following his moderate "middle way" and achieving enlightenment and **nirvana** (escape from the cycle of reincarnation) while in meditation under the Bodhi tree.

Buddha's peripatetic teaching is the basis of all Buddhism. Upon his death, two schools arose and spread throughout Asia. The oldest and probably closest to the original practice is **Theravada** (Doctrine of the Elders), sometimes referred to as **Hinayana** (the Small Vehicle), which prevails in Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia and posits the enlightenment of individuals in this life, one at a time. The other school is **Mahayana** (the Large Vehicle), practiced in eastern Asia and Vietnam, which speaks of group enlightenment (we all go at once).

Buddhism has one aim only: to abolish suffering. To do so, according to Buddhism, one must transcend the ego, the "self," and attachment to the fleeting pleasures in an ever-changing material world, in order to see things clearly—with wisdom—and find peace.

There is no god in Buddhism; the Buddha is but an example. Buddhist practices, particularly Theravada, center on meditation and require that individuals, according to Buddha himself, look within and come to understand the **Four**

these—plus European, Indian, Han Chinese, and Arab families. Of the 75% of the population that calls itself Thai, a great number of people in northeastern Isaan are of Lao ancestry. In the past century, Thailand has also become home to many migrating hill tribes in the north—tribes who've come from Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and southern China, many as refugees. As you travel southward the Malaysian border, you find Thai people who share cultural and religious affinity with their southern Malay neighbors. Also in the past 50 years, Thailand has seen a boom in Chinese immigrants.

The Thais are a warm and peaceful people, with a culture that springs from Indian and Sri Lankan origins. Early Thais adopted many Brahman practices, evident in royal ceremony and social hierarchy—Thailand is a very class-oriented culture. Even their cherished national story, the *Ramakien,* the subject of almost all Thai classical dances and temple murals, finds its origin in the Indian Hindu epic the *Ramayana.* Thai Buddhism follows the Theravada sect, imported from Sri Lanka along with the classic bell-shape stupa seen in many temple grounds.

Noble Truths: the existence of suffering; its arising; the path to eliminating suffering; and its ultimate passing by practice of the Eightfold Path, a road map to right living and good conduct.

Buddhist philosophy pervades every aspect of life, morality, and thought in the countries of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The monastic community, called the ***sangha,*** is supported by local people and serves as the cultural touchstone and often an important avenue of education. Monks live in the "supramundane," free from the usual human concerns of finding food, clothing, and shelter. Instead, they focus on the rigorous practice of meditation, study, and austerities prescribed by the Theravada tradition. Mahayana traditions from China hold important sway over life in parts of the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Lay practitioners adopt the law of **karma,** in which every action has effects and the energy of past action, good or evil, continues forever and is "reborn." Merit is gained by entering the monkhood (which most males do for a few days or months), helping in the construction of a monastery or a stupa, contributing to education, giving alms, or performing any act of kindness, no matter how small. When monks go with their alms bowls from house to house, they are not begging, but offering laypersons an opportunity to **"make merit"** by supporting them.

Buddha images are honored and revered in the Eastern tradition and are said to radiate the essence of Buddha, ideals that we should revere and struggle to achieve; but the images themselves are not holy or spiritually charged, per se. Buddhism does not seek converts, and, as long as they follow some simple rules of conduct, tourists are welcome guests at most Buddhist fetes and festivals.

Perhaps the two main influences in Thai life today are spirituality and the royal family. In nearly every household throughout the country, you'll find a spirit house to appease the spirit of the earth, a portrait of the king in a prominent spot and perhaps pictures of a few previous kings, a dais for Buddha images and religious objects, and portraits of each son as he enters the monkhood, as almost all sons do.

LAOS, VIETNAM & CAMBODIA

Together, the countries of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia make up one of the most ethnically diverse regions of Southeast Asia. Outside the cities, little English is spoken in any of these countries except by tour guides and others who have frequent contact with Western visitors. Much of the architecture and art in Cambodia and Laos is influenced by Buddhism and includes some of the world's most renowned temples, along with exquisitely sculpted Buddha images. The temple complexes of Angkor Wat in Cambodia are among the architectural wonders of the ancient world, while the finest temples in Laos are found in the ancient capital of Luang Prabang.

Note: The ethnic minorities, or hill tribes, of northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand all share a common heritage with one another, originating from either Himalayan tribes or southern Chinese clans. You'll find startling similarities in the customs and languages of all these people.

LAOS In Laos, approximately half the population is ethnic Lao descended from centuries of migration, mostly from southern China. A landlocked country with few natural resources, Laos has had little luck entering the global trade scene and remains dependent on the international donor community. If you think the Thais are laid-back, you'll have to check the Laos for a pulse. In fact, Lao culture is most often compared with that of the Thais because the two share common roots of language and culture, although the Thais will never admit it because they often look down upon their northern neighbors. Large communities of ethnic minorities live in agrarian and subsistence communities, particularly in the north, and carry on rich traditional crafts and practices.

VIETNAM In Vietnam, the ethnic Vietnamese are a fusion of Viet, Tai (a southern Chinese group), Indonesian, and Chinese who first settled here between 200 b.c. and a.d. 200. Although Vietnam has no official religion, several religions have significantly impacted Vietnamese culture, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and animism. Animism, which is the oldest religious practice in Vietnam and many other Southeast Asian countries, is centered on belief in a spirit world.

Ancient cultural traditions lean toward borrowings from the mandarins of old Chinese dynasties that claimed sovereignty over Vietnam. In the 1900s, the French added a new flavor to the mix. Modern Vietnam is defined by its pell-mell rush to capitalism.

CAMBODIA The population of Cambodia is made up primarily of ethnic Khmers who have lived here since around the 2nd century a.d. and whose religion and culture have been influenced by interaction with Indians, Javanese, Thais, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The achievements of the ancient Angkor empire were a long time ago, and modern Khmer culture still struggles in the aftermath of many years of war and terror. Relative political stability is new here, and Cambodia has far to go to catch up economically and with the infrastructure of the other countries in the region. Basic medical necessities are still lacking; land mines still cover the countryside and kill an estimated four people each day. Time and effort by civil authorities and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) will only tell. Life in Cambodia is marked by devout Buddhist ritual, much like its neighbors, which fosters a pervasive gentleness among the Khmer.

SINGAPORE

Seventy-eight per cent of Singaporeans trace their heritage to migrating waves from China's southern provinces, particularly from the Hokkien, Teowchew, Hakka, Cantonese, and Hainanese dialect groups. Back then, the Chinese community was driven by rags-to-riches stories—the poor worker hawking vegetables who opened a grocery store and then started a chain of stores and now drives a Mercedes. This story still motivates them today.

But it's not just Chinese who have dominated the scene. The island started off with a handful of Malay inhabitants; then came the British colonials with Indian administrators, followed by Muslim Indian moneylenders, Chinese merchants, Chinese coolie laborers, and Indian convict labor, plus European settlers and immigrants from all over Southeast Asia. Over 2 centuries of modern history, each group made its contribution to "Singaporean culture."

Today, as your average Singaporean struggles to balance traditional values with modern demands of globalization, his country gets raked over the coals for being sterile and overly westernized. Older folks

are becoming frustrated by younger generations who discard their traditions in their pursuit of "The Five Cs"—career, condo, car, credit card, and cash. Temples and ethnic neighborhoods are finding more revenue from tourists than from the communities they once served. Although many lament the loss of the good old days, most are willing to sacrifice a little tradition to be Southeast Asia's most stable and wealthiest country.

MALAYSIA

Malaysia's population consists primarily of ethnic Malays, labeled Bumiputeras, a political classification that also encompasses tribal people who live in peninsular Malaysia and Borneo. Almost all Malays are Muslim, and conservative values are the norm. The ruling government party supports an Islam that is open and tolerant to other cultures, but a growing minority favors strict Islamic law and government, further marginalizing the country's large Chinese and Indian population. These foreign cultures migrated to Malaysia during the British colonial period as trading merchants, laborers, and administrators. Today, Malaysia recognizes ethnic Chinese and Indian citizens as equals under national law. However, government development and education policies always seem to favor Bumiputeras.

Among the favorite Malaysian recreational pastimes are kite flying, using ornately decorated paper kites, and top spinning. Some still practice silat, a Malaysian form of martial arts.

BALI (INDONESIA)

No country in Southeast Asia has a more ethnically diverse population than Indonesia, with more than 350 ethnic groups with their own languages and cultures scattered among the 6,000 inhabited islands of this vast archipelago of more than 14,000 islands.

Of all the islands, Bali stands out for its especially rich cultural life, which is inextricably linked with its Hindu beliefs. Life here is marked by a unique flow of ritual; whether painting, carving, dancing, or playing music, it seems that all Balinese are involved in the arts or practice devout daily rituals of beauty. Flower offerings to the gods are a common sight, and the Balinese are forever paying homage to Hindu deities at more than 20,000 temples and during the 60 annual festivals on the island.

The majority of the island's population is native Balinese; there are quite a few people from other parts of Indonesia who are here for work opportunities. English is widely spoken in the tourist parts of Bali, which means that just about everywhere you go someone will speak enough to help you out.

ETIQUETTE

"Different countries, different customs," as Sean Connery said to Michael Caine in *The Man Who Would Be King*. And although each destination covered in this book proves that rule by having its own twists on etiquette, some general pointers will allow you to go though your days of traveling without inadvertently offending your hosts. (For etiquette tips in individual countries, see the relevant chapters.)

GREETINGS, GESTURES & SOCIAL INTERACTION In these modern times, the common **Western handshake** has become extremely prevalent throughout Southeast Asia, but it is by no means universal. There are a plethora of traditional greetings, so when greeting someone—an older man and, especially, a woman of any age—it's safest to wait for a gesture or observe those around you and then follow suit. In Muslim culture, for instance, it is not acceptable for men and women not related by blood or marriage to touch.

In interpersonal relations in strongly Buddhist areas (Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand), it helps to **take a gentle approach** to human relationships. A person showing

anger or ill temper would be regarded with surprise and disapproval. A gentle approach will take you much further.

In countries with significant Muslim and Hindu cultures (Malaysia, Singapore, and Bali), **use only your right hand in social interaction.** Traditionally, the left hand is used only for personal hygiene. Not only should you eat with your right hand and give and receive all gifts with your right hand, but you should also make sure that you make all gestures, especially **pointing** (and, even more especially, pointing in temples and mosques), with your right hand. In all the countries discussed in this book, it's also considered more polite to point with your knuckle (with your hand facing palm down) than with your finger.

In all destinations covered in this guide, women seated on the floor should never sit with their legs crossed in front of them—instead, tuck your legs to the side. Men may sit with legs crossed. Both men and women should also **avoid showing the bottoms of the feet,** which are considered the most unclean part of the body. If you cross your legs while on the floor or in a chair, don't point your soles toward other people. Also be careful not to use your foot to point or gesture. **Remove your shoes** when entering a temple or private home. And don't ever step over someone's body or legs.

On a similar note, in Buddhist and Hindu cultures, the head is considered the most sacred part of the body; therefore, **do not casually touch another person's head**—and this includes patting children on the head.

DRESSING FOR CULTURAL SUCCESS

The basic rule is simple: **Dress modestly.** Except perhaps on the grounds of resorts and in heavily touristed areas such as Bali's Kuta and Thailand's beaches, foreigners displaying navels, chests, or shoulders, or wearing short shorts or short skirts, will attract stares. Although shorts and bathing suits are accepted on the beach, avoid parading around in them elsewhere, no matter how hot it is.

In Singapore, wear your smartest clothes (looking poor does not make a good impression).

TEMPLE & MOSQUE ETIQUETTE

When visiting the **mosques,** be sure to dress appropriately. Neither men nor women will be admitted wearing shorts. Women should not wear short skirts or sleeveless, backless, or low-cut tops. Both men and women are required to leave their shoes outside. Also, never enter the mosque's main prayer hall; this area is reserved for Muslims only. No cameras or video cameras are allowed, and remember to turn off cellphones. You should not plan to go to the mosques between 11am and 2pm on Friday, the Sabbath day.

Visitors are welcome to walk around and explore most **temples** and ***wats.*** As in the mosques, remember to dress appropriately—some temples might refuse to admit you if you're showing too much skin—and to leave your shoes outside. Photography is permitted in most temples, although some, such as Wat Phra Kaeo in Thailand, prohibit it. Never climb on a Buddha image, and if you sit down, never point your feet in the direction of the Buddha. Do not cross in front of a person who is in prayer. Also, women should never touch a monk, try to shake his hand, or even give something to one directly (the monk will provide a cloth for you to lay the item upon, and then he will collect it). Monks are not permitted to touch women or to speak directly to them anywhere but inside a temple or a *wat.*

3

Planning Your Trip to Southeast Asia

The later chapters in this guide provide specific information on traveling to and getting around Southeast Asia's individual countries, but in this chapter we give you some region-wide tips and information that will help you plan your trip.

1 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS & CUSTOMS

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Many countries covered in this guide require only a **valid passport** for citizens of the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. For an up-to-date listing of passport requirements around the world, go to the "Foreign Entry Requirement" page of the U.S. State Department at **www.travel.state.gov**.

Note that Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia require all visitors to have entry **visas.** Though most international airports offer visas upon arrival, and there are more overland points where you can apply with passport photos and money when you arrive, if you plan to enter Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia from rural overland points, you often need to obtain a visa beforehand (you may even need to specify which entry point). See individual country chapters for specific information.

BALI (INDONESIA) Visitors from the U.S., Canada, most of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand are given a visa upon arrival for a fee of $10 (£6.65) for stays of 7 days or less and $25 (£17) for stays of up to 30 days. The only official gateways to Bali are Ngurah Rai Airport or the seaports of Padang Bai and Benoa. If you want to stay longer than 30 days, you must get a tourist or business visa before coming to Indonesia. Tourist visas cannot be extended, while business visas can be extended for 6 months at Indonesian immigration offices.

CAMBODIA All visitors are required to carry a passport and visa. A 1-month visa can be obtained upon entry at the Phnom Penh or Siem Reap international airports for $20. Applying online (http://evisa.mtaic.gov.kh) for a 1-month e-visa costs $25. The procedure is simple, straightforward, and will save you time and energy. Bring one 4×6-inch passport photo for your application, or be fined. Visa on arrival is available at several land crossings, including Poi Pet (Thailand), the boat-crossing point from Chau Doc (Vietnam), and Dong Kralor (Laos) for $22.

LAOS Visitors need a valid passport and visa to visit Laos. There are a number of entry sites where visas are granted upon arrival: by air to Vientiane or Luang Prabang, or when crossing from Thailand over the Friendship Bridge between Vientiane and Nong Khai, or between Chiang Khong and Houay Xai in the far north, and Mukdahan and Savannakhet or Chong Mek and Vung Tao (near Pakse) in the far south. A 30-day visa at these arrival points costs $30. You will also need a passport-size photo. When coming from

Vietnam, be sure to have a prearranged visa. At an embassy outside of Laos, the going rate for a 30-day visa is $35; you'll have to wait up to 5 days for processing (less in Bangkok). For a fee, travel agents in Thailand and other countries in the region can help you jump over the bureaucratic hurdles and get a visa in 1 day.

MALAYSIA To enter Malaysia, you must have a valid passport. Citizens of the U.S. do not need visas for tourism and business visits. Citizens of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. do not require a visa for tourism or business visits not exceeding 1 month.

SINGAPORE To enter Singapore, you'll need a valid passport. Visas are not necessary for citizens of the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. Upon entry, visitors from these countries will be issued a 30-day pass for a social visit only, except for Americans, who get a 90-day pass.

THAILAND All visitors to Thailand must carry a passport valid for at least 6 months. Technically, you need proof of onward passage (either a return or through ticket), though this is rarely requested. Visas are not required for stays of up to 30 days for citizens of the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, or the U.K., but 3-month tourist visas can be arranged before arrival.

VIETNAM Residents of the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. need both a passport and a valid visa to enter Vietnam. A tourist visa usually lasts 30 days and costs $65. You need to specify your date of entry and exit. Though there's no official policy, tourist visas can commonly be extended with little hassle. Multiple-entry business visas are available that are valid for up to 3 months; however, you must have a sponsoring agency in Vietnam, and it can take much longer to process. For short business trips, it's less complicated simply to enter as a tourist.

CUSTOMS

What You Can Bring into Southeast Asia

Allowable amounts of tobacco, alcohol, and currency are comparable in all countries: usually two cartons of cigarettes, up to two bottles of liquor, and between $3,000 and $10,000. Check individual chapters for exact amounts. Plant material and animals fall under restrictions across the board. For Singapore, there are no duty-free allowances for cigarettes.

What You Can Take Home from Southeast Asia

Restrictions on what you can take out of the various nations of Southeast Asia are loose at best. Expect a red flag if you have any kind of plant materials or animals, but the most notable restriction has to do with antiques. To prevent the kind of wholesale looting of the region's treasures in the recent colonial past, you might be stopped if you are carrying any Buddhist statuary or authentic antiques or religious artifacts. This does not apply to tourist trinkets, however aged and interesting. In fact, despite any salesman's claim of authenticity, you'll be hard-pressed to find authentic antiques.

U.S. CITIZENS For specifics on what you can bring back and the corresponding fees, download the invaluable free pamphlet *Know Before You Go* online at **www.cbp.gov**. (Click on "Travel" and then "Know Before You Go! Online Brochure.") Or contact **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP),** 1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20229 (✆ **877/287-8667**), and request the pamphlet.

CANADIAN CITIZENS For a clear summary of Canadian rules, write for the booklet *I Declare,* issued by the **Canada Border Services Agency** (✆ **800/461-9999** in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

U.K. CITIZENS For information, contact **HM Customs & Excise** (✆ **0845/010-9000,** or 020/8929-0152 from outside the U.K.; www.hmce.gov.uk).

AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS A helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go.* For more information, contact the **Australian Customs Service** (✆ **1300/363-263;** www.customs.gov.au).

NEW ZEALAND CITIZENS Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4.* For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs,** The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (✆ **04/473-6099** or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

2 MONEY

The East Asian financial crisis is now a distant memory, and the countries of Southeast Asia are generally gaining economic clout in the world; but the rate of exchange, not to mention the price of most goods and services, means that travel in the region is very budget friendly. In places such as Laos or Cambodia, you'll find that you can live quite well on very little, and the region's resort destinations and luxury accommodations in general come at a fraction of what you might pay in your home country. **ATM** service is good in the larger cities but can be scant, at best, in some of the region's backwaters. **Traveler's checks,** an anachronism elsewhere in the world, are still not a bad idea, especially in the developing countries of the region. Note that the **U.S. dollar** is the de facto currency for many Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Hotels in particular prefer doing business in U.S. dollars to dealing in local currency, a practice that helps them stay afloat amid fluctuating currency values. In some parts, everybody down to the smallest shop vendor quotes prices in U.S. dollars, and particularly the big-ticket items are best handled with greenbacks instead of large stacks of local currency.

While dealing in U.S. dollars can make things less complicated, always keep in mind local currency values so you know if you're being charged the correct amount. In this book, we've listed **hotel, restaurant, and attraction rates** in whatever form the establishments quoted them—in U.S. dollars where those were quoted, and in local currencies (with U.S. dollar and British pound equivalents) where those were used.

Note that with the exception of the Singapore dollar, Malaysian ringgit, and Hong Kong dollar (which have remained stable), all other Southeast Asian national currencies are still in a state of flux. Before you budget your trip based on rates we give in this book, be sure to check the currency's current status. You can find a comprehensive currency converter at **www.oanda.com/convert/classic**.

CURRENCY

You will have to rely on local currency when traveling in many rural areas where neither traveler's checks nor credit cards are accepted. The U.S. dollar is the most readily accepted foreign currency throughout Southeast Asia, and it's a good idea to carry some greenbacks as backup.

It's not a bad idea to try and exchange at least some money—just enough to cover airport incidentals and transportation to your hotel—before you leave home (though don't expect the exchange rate to be ideal), so you can avoid lines at airport ATMs; most international arrival points in the region, however, have 24-hour exchange

counters. You can exchange money at your bank or local American Express or Thomas Cook office. If you're far away from a bank with currency-exchange services, American Express offers traveler's checks and foreign currency, though with a $15 or der fee and additional shipping costs, through www.americanexpress.com or ✆ **800/807-6233.**

Listed below are the currencies of all destinations in this guide.

BALI (INDONESIA) Indonesia's main currency is the **rupiah (Rp),** with bills of Rp100, 500, 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, and 100,000. Coins come in denominations of Rp25, 50, 100, and 500. After wild fluctuations in the 1990s, the rupiah has stabilized in recent years to **Rp11,223= $1.**

CAMBODIA Cambodia's monetary unit is the **riel,** which is available in 100, 200, 500, 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, and 100,000 riel notes. Cambodia's volatile exchange rate typically fluctuates, but is currently at **4,000 riel = $1.** It's a good idea to bring a supply of U.S. dollars, as the dollar is considered Cambodia's second currency and is accepted—even preferred—by many hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants. If paying in dollars, you'll get the small change in riel.

LAOS The primary unit of currency is the **kip** (pronounced *keep*), which comes in denominations of 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 notes. The exchange rate is approximately **8,500 kip = $1.** As in Cambodia, many tourist establishments prefer payment in U.S. dollars. In many areas of Laos, both U.S. dollars and Thai baht are preferred over the local currency.

MALAYSIA The **ringgit (RM),** which is also referred to as the Malaysian dollar, is the unit of currency. One ringgit equals 100 sen, and notes come in RM1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500, and 1,000. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 50 sen, as well as RM1. The exchange rate is approximately **RM3.59 = $1.**

SINGAPORE The **Singapore dollar (S$),** commonly referred to as the Sing dollar, is the local unit of currency, with notes issued in denominations of S$2, $5, $10, $50, $100, $500, and $1,000; coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, and 50 cents and the gold-colored S$1. The exchange rate is approximately **S$1.49 = $1.**

THAILAND The Thai **baht (B)** is made up of 100 satang. It comes in colored notes of 20 (green), 50 (blue), 100 (red), 500 (purple), and 1,000 (khaki) baht. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, and 10 baht, as well as 25 and 50 satang. The exchange rate is approximately **35B = $1.**

VIETNAM The main unit of Vietnamese currency is the **dong (VND),** which comes in denominations of 500,000, 200,000, 100,000, 50,000, 10,000, 5,000, 1,000, 500, and 200 notes. There are no coins. Most tourist venues accept dollars, and even in small towns you will at least be able to exchange greenbacks, if not use dollars directly. The exchange rate is approximately **16,000VND = $1.**

ATMS

The easiest and best way to get cash away from home is from an ATM. The **Cirrus** (✆ **800/424-7787;** www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (✆ **800/843-7587;** www.visa.com) networks span the globe; look at the back of your bank card to see which network you're on, then call or check online for ATM locations at your destination. Be sure you know your personal identification number (PIN) and daily withdrawal limit before you depart. ***Note:*** Many banks impose a fee every time you use a card at another bank's ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions (up to $5 or more) than for domestic ones (where they're rarely more than $2). In addition, the bank from which you withdraw cash may charge its own fee. For international withdrawal fees, ask your bank.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards are another safe way to carry money. They provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can get cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs, provided you know your PIN. Keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time. Also, note that many banks now assess a 1% to 3% "transaction fee" on *all* charges you incur abroad (whether you're using the local currency or your native currency). Before you leave home, call your credit card company to find out if there's a daily limit on cash advances.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS

In most parts of the world, traveler's checks are an anachronism from the days before ATMs made cash accessible at any time. But be forewarned that the developing countries in Southeast Asia have scant ATM service, especially in rural areas. Traveler's checks are a sound alternative to traveling with dangerously large amounts of cash, and they can be replaced if lost or stolen.

You can buy traveler's checks at most banks. They are offered in denominations of $20, $50, $100, $500, and sometimes $1,000. Generally, you'll pay a service charge ranging from 1% to 4%.

The most popular traveler's checks are offered by **American Express** (✆ **800/807-6233,** or 800/221-7282 for cardholders—this number accepts collect calls, offers service in several foreign languages, and exempts Amex gold and platinum cardholders from the 1% fee); **Visa** (✆ **800/732-1322,** or AAA members can call ✆ 866/339-3378 to get checks up to $1,500 for a $9.95 fee); and **MasterCard** (✆ **800/223-9920**).

American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard all offer **foreign-currency traveler's checks,** which are useful if you're traveling to one country; they're accepted at locations where dollar checks may not be.

If you carry traveler's checks, keep a record of their serial numbers separate from your checks in the event that they are stolen or lost. You'll get a refund faster if you know the numbers.

3 WHEN TO GO

With a few exceptions, wherever and whenever you travel in Southeast Asia, you are likely to encounter hot and humid weather. All of Southeast Asia lies within the Tropics, and the countries closest to the Equator—Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and southern Thailand—have the hottest annual temperatures. See the individual destination chapters for weather information in each country.

HOLIDAYS & FESTIVALS Some of the holidays celebrated in Southeast Asia might affect your vacation plans, either positively or negatively. See the individual destination chapters for listings of the major holidays celebrated in each country.

4 TRAVEL INSURANCE

Check your existing insurance policies and credit card coverage before you buy travel insurance. You may already be covered for lost luggage, canceled tickets, or medical expenses.

The cost of travel insurance varies widely, depending on the cost and length of your trip, your age and health, and the type of trip you're taking, but expect to pay between 5% and 8% of the vacation

itself. You can get estimates from various providers through **InsureMyTrip.com**.

TRIP-CANCELLATION INSURANCE Trip-cancellation insurance will help you retrieve your money if you have to back out of a trip or depart early, or if your travel supplier goes bankrupt. Permissible reasons for trip cancellation can range from sickness to natural disasters to the State Department declaring a destination unsafe for travel.

For more information, contact one of the following recommended insurers: **Access America** (✆ 866/807-3982; www.accessamerica.com), **Travelex Insurance Services** (✆ 888/457-4602; www.travelex-insurance.com), **Travel Guard International** (✆ 800/826-4919; www.travelguard.com), **Travel Insured International** (✆ 800/243-3174; www.travelinsured.com).

MEDICAL INSURANCE For travel overseas, most U.S. health plans (including Medicare and Medicaid) do not provide coverage, and the ones that do often require you to pay for services upfront and reimburse you only after you return home. As a safety net, you may want to buy travel medical insurance, particularly if you're heading to a remote or high-risk area where emergency evacuation might be necessary. If you require additional medical insurance, try **MEDEX Assistance** (✆ **410/453-6300;** www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (✆ **800/821-2828;** www.travelassistance.com; for general information on services, call the company's Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc., at ✆ 800/777-8710).

LOST-LUGGAGE INSURANCE On flights within the U.S., checked baggage is covered up to $2,500 per ticketed passenger. On international flights (including U.S. portions of international trips), baggage coverage is limited to approximately $9.07 per pound, up to approximately $635 per checked bag. If you plan to check items more valuable than what's covered by the standard liability, see if your homeowner's policy covers your valuables, get baggage insurance as part of your comprehensive travel-insurance package, or buy Travel Guard's "BagTrak" product.

If your luggage is lost, immediately file a lost-luggage claim at the airport, detailing the luggage contents. Most airlines require that you report delayed, damaged, or lost baggage within 4 hours of arrival. The airlines are required to deliver luggage, once found, directly to your house or destination free of charge.

5 HEALTH & SAFETY

STAYING HEALTHY

Health concerns should comprise much of your preparation for a trip to Southeast Asia, and staying healthy on the road takes vigilance. Tropical heat and mosquitoes are the biggest dangers. Travelers should also exercise caution over dietary change and cleanliness. Just a few pretrip precautions and general prudence, though, are all that you need for a safe and healthy trip.

General Availability of Healthcare

The best hospitals and healthcare facilities are located in the large cities of countries that have the greatest number of Western visitors—Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and Bangkok (Thailand). In rural areas of these countries and throughout the lesser-developed countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, there are limited healthcare facilities: Hospitals are few and far between and are generally of poor quality. Even in heavily touristed Bali, you're better off evacuating to one of the more developed countries if faced with a serious medical situation. Over-the-counter medications are available anywhere, but it's a good idea to bring antidiarrheal medication and rehydration salts, among others.

Contact the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT; ✆ 716/754-4883,** or 416/652-0137 in Canada; www.iamat.org) for tips on health concerns and lists of local, English-speaking doctors in the countries you're visiting. The U.S. **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (**✆ 800/311-3435;** www.cdc.gov) provides up-to-date information on health hazards by region or country and offers tips on food safety. You can find listings of reliable clinics overseas at the **International Society of Travel Medicine** (www.istm.org). The website **www.tripprep.com**, sponsored by a consortium of travel medicine practitioners, may also offer helpful advice on traveling abroad.

Common Ailments

TROPICAL ILLNESSES Among Southeast Asia's tropical diseases carried by mosquitoes are **malaria, dengue fever, chikungunya,** and **Japanese encephalitis.** Reports about malaria prophylactics vary. While most local health agencies tell you not to waste your time with antimalarial drugs, the CDC still advises people to take tablets, most of which cause uncomfortable side effects. In truth, your only sure way to avoid mosquito-borne diseases is to avoid being bitten. Repellents that contain **DEET** are the most effective, but gentler alternatives (see baby-care products in any pharmacy) provide DEET-free mosquito protection without the chemicals. Also be aware that malaria mosquitoes bite between the hours of 5 and 7 in the morning and in the evening, so it's important to exercise caution at those times (wearing long sleeves and long trousers is a good idea, as is burning mosquito coils). Dengue-fever mosquitoes bite during the day.

Hepatitis A can be contracted from water or food, and **cholera** epidemics sometimes occur in remote areas. **Bilharzia, schistosomiasis,** and **giardia** are parasitic diseases that can be contracted from swimming in or drinking from stagnant or untreated water in lakes or streams.

Anyone contemplating sexual activity should be aware that **HIV** is rampant in many Southeast Asian countries, along with other STDs such as gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, and hepatitis B.

DIETARY RED FLAGS Unless you intend to confine your travels to the big cities and dine only at restaurants that serve Western-style food, you will likely be sampling some new cuisine. This could lead initially to upset stomach or diarrhea, which usually lasts just a few days as your body adapts to the change in your diet.

Except for Singapore, where tap water is safe to drink, **always drink bottled water,** and **never use tap water for drinking or even brushing teeth.** Peel all fruits and vegetables, and avoid raw shellfish and seafood. Also beware of ice unless it is made from purified water. (Any suspicious water can be purified by boiling for 10 min. or treating with purifying tablets.)

If you're a vegetarian, you will find that Southeast Asia is a great place to travel; vegetarian dishes abound throughout the region. In terms of hygiene, restaurants are generally better options than street stalls, but don't forgo good local cuisine just because it's served from a cart. Be sure to carry diarrhea medication as well as any prescription medications you might need. It's acceptable to wipe down utensils in restaurants, and in some places locals even ask for a glass of hot water for just that purpose (some travelers even carry their own plastic chopsticks or cutlery). Bringing antiseptic hand-washing gel is a good idea for when you're out in the sticks.

So how can you tell if something will upset your stomach before you eat it? Trust your instincts. Avoid buffet-style places, especially on the street, and be sure all food is cooked thoroughly and made to order. If your gut tells you not to eat that gelatinous chicken foot, don't eat it. If your hosts insist but you're still afraid,

explain about your "foreign stomach" with a regretful smile and accept a cup of tea instead. Be careful of raw ingredients, common in most Asian cuisines, but realize that questions such as, "Are these vegetables washed in clean water?" are inappropriate anywhere. Use your best judgment or simply decline.

BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS There are all kinds of creepy critters to be aware of in any tropical climate. In rural accommodations, mosquito nets are often required and, if so, are always provided by hoteliers. Check your shoes in the morning (or wear sandals) just in case some ugly little thing is taking a nap in your Nikes. Keep an eye out for snakes and poisonous spiders when in jungle terrain or when doing any trekking. Having a guide doesn't preclude exercising caution. **Rabies** is rampant, especially in rural areas of the less-developed nations, and extreme care should be taken when walking, particularly at night. In places such as Thailand, dogs are simply fed and left to roam free, and you are likely to run into some ornery mutts. A walking stick or umbrella is a suitable deterrent when out in the countryside. It's also important to know that all dogs have been hit with hurled stones sometime in their life, and, a nod to Pavlov here, the very act of reaching to the ground for a handful of stones is often enough to send an angry dog on the run, for fear of being pelted. If you are bitten, wash the wound immediately and, even if you suffer just the slightest puncture or scrape, seek medical attention and a series of rabies shots (now quite a simple affair of injections in the arm in a few installments over several weeks).

RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES **SARS** hit the region hard in the winter and spring of 2003. Singapore reported some cases and essentially closed to tourism, and though most other countries in the region reported no cases of the disease, places such as Thailand suffered the fallout of the regionwide scare. There have been no reported cases of SARS since 2004. **Tuberculosis** is a concern in more remote areas where testing is still uncommon.

The **avian influenza,** also called the **bird flu,** is another public-relations nightmare in Southeast Asia. A number of cases have been reported in Thailand and Vietnam, and millions of chickens suspected of carrying the illness have been slaughtered. The victims of the bird flu have been few in number (statistically insignificant, really) and are mostly isolated to people working in the poultry industry. The countries affected have been unusually forthright about reporting new cases, and the disease is yet limited in scope. It is important to note that you cannot contract bird flu from consuming cooked chicken.

Air quality is not good in the larger cities such as Bangkok or Ho Chi Minh City; with no emissions standards, buses, trucks, and cars belch some toxic stuff, so visitors with respiratory concerns or sensitivity should take caution.

SUN/ELEMENTS/EXTREME WEATHER EXPOSURE Sun and heatstroke are a major concern anywhere in Southeast Asia. Limit your exposure to the sun, especially during the first few days of your trip and, thereafter, from 11am to 2pm. Use a sunscreen with a high protection factor, and apply it liberally. Asians are still big fans of parasols, so don't be shy about using an umbrella to shade yourself (all the Buddhist monks do). Remember that children need more protection than adults.

Always be sure to drink plenty of bottled water, which is the best defense against heat exhaustion and the more serious, life-threatening heatstroke. Also remember that coffee, tea, soft drinks, and alcoholic beverages should not be substituted for water because they are diuretics that dehydrate the body. In extremely hot and humid weather, try to stay out of the midday heat, and confine most of your daytime traveling to early morning and late afternoon. If you ever feel weak,

fatigued, dizzy, or disoriented, get out of the sun immediately and go to a shady, cool place. To prevent sunburn, always wear a hat and apply sunscreen to all exposed areas of skin.

Be aware of major weather patterns; many island destinations are prone to typhoons or severe storms.

What to Do If You Get Sick Away from Home

Hospitals and **emergency numbers** are listed under "Fast Facts" in each destination chapter. Any foreign embassy or consulate can provide a list of area doctors who speak English. If you get sick, consider asking your hotel concierge to recommend a local doctor—even his or her own. You can also try the emergency room at a local hospital. Many hospitals also have walk-in clinics for cases that are not life-threatening; you may not get immediate attention, but you won't pay the high price of an emergency-room visit. In the larger cities of Southeast Asia, healthcare at hospitals and private clinics is of an international caliber and quite affordable.

You will need to pay in advance for any medical treatment and be reimbursed later. See "Medical Insurance," under "Travel Insurance," above, for details.

If you suffer from a chronic illness, consult your doctor before your departure. Pack **prescription medications** in your carry-on luggage, and keep them in their original containers, with pharmacy labels—otherwise they won't make it through airport security. Also bring the generic name of prescription medicines, in case a local pharmacist is unfamiliar with the brand name. Prescription medication is readily available, often over the counter.

STAYING SAFE

The good news is that anonymous, violent crime is not an issue in most countries in the region, but petty theft, pickpocketing, and purse snatching are common. It is a good idea to carry a hidden travel wallet with your passport and documents, and keep an eye on valuables in public.

Road conditions vary throughout the region, but most large cities, from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh, are busy and chaotic. Even for intrepid travelers who push their limits out in the wilds, crossing big-city streets, even at prescribed crossings, can be the greatest risk on your trip; move slowly and exercise caution. Rural roads in places such as Laos and Cambodia are often no more than dirt tracks. And even where the roads are good, Western visitors are often shocked at the seeming lack of rules and the fact that, on most roads, might is right: The biggest, fastest, and most aggressive vehicle takes precedence, and belligerent horn blowing is the rule. It is best to rent a car with a hired driver instead of trying to drive yourself. On some bus rides, you might want to keep your eyes just on the scenery and not on the road ahead.

In places such as the beach towns of Thailand, motorbike accidents are all too common, and you're sure to meet one or two road-rashed victims. Exercise extreme caution on rented bikes, especially if you're inexperienced, and always wear a helmet.

Dicey political situations arise and pass with frequency; it's important to check travel warnings with the U.S. State Department (www.travel.state.gov) or the most up-to-date sources on the region. Places such as Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and southern Thailand are known to flare with separatist movements and terrorism, while the ongoing unrest in Thailand shows that even supposedly stable countries are susceptible to political turmoil. Stay abreast of any and all news before traveling.

When it comes to drugs: "Just say no." Grown, produced, and shipped through the region, drugs such as heroin, opium, and marijuana are readily available. There are island spots and mountain retreats where it might seem like the thing to do,

but in all cases here, national laws are strict. Many visitors find themselves in an intensive language school of another variety (in other words, jail) in short order if they can't bribe their way out of it. It's certainly not worth it anywhere.

6 SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Most disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling. There are more options and resources out there than ever before. Larger hotels in the major cities of the region have adequate facilities for visitors with disabilities, though in rural destinations, specialized amenities are scant at best.

Many travel agencies offer customized tours and itineraries for those with disabilities. Among them are **Flying Wheels Travel** (✆ **507/451-5005;** www.flyingwheelstravel.com), **Access-Able Travel Source** (✆ **303/232-2979;** www.access-able.com), and **Accessible Journeys** (✆ **800/846-4537** or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com). **Avis Rent a Car** has an "Avis Access" program that offers such services as a dedicated 24-hour toll-free number (✆ **888/879-4273**) for customers with special travel needs; special car features such as swivel seats, spinner knobs, and hand controls; and accessible bus service.

Organizations that offer assistance to travelers with disabilities include **Moss Rehab** (www.mossresourcenet.org), the **American Foundation for the Blind (AFB;** ✆ **800/232-5463;** www.afb.org), and **SATH** (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality; ✆ **212/447-7284;** www.sath.org). **AirAmbulanceCard.com** is now partnered with SATH and allows you to preselect top-notch hospitals in case of an emergency.

For more information specifically targeted to travelers with disabilities, the online magazine **Gimp on the Go** (www.gimponthego.com) has destination reviews, travel tips, bulletin boards, and links to other sites. Also check out the magazines ***Emerging Horizons*** (www.emerginghorizons.com), published quarterly, and ***Open World,*** published by SATH.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Acceptance of alternative lifestyles in Southeast Asia, like anywhere, runs the gamut. One thing to remember is that many of the societies and cultures of the region are, by tradition, very modest, and public displays of affection of any kind are not acceptable. Gay nightlife choices are many and varied in larger cities such as Bangkok, Singapore, and Hong Kong, but in rural areas, provincial attitudes vary and intolerance is not uncommon.

The **International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association** (**IGLTA;** ✆ **800/448-8550** or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org) is the trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry. It offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses; go to its website and click on "Members."

Many agencies offer tours and travel itineraries specifically for gay and lesbian travelers. Among them are **Above and Beyond Tours** (✆ **800/397-2681;** www.abovebeyondtours.com), **Now, Voyager** (✆ **800/255-6951;** www.nowvoyager.com), and **Olivia Cruises & Resorts** (✆ **800/631-6277;** www.olivia.com).

Gay.com Travel (✆ **800/929-2268** or 415/644-8044; www.gay.com/travel or www.outandabout.com) is an excellent online successor to the popular ***Out & About*** print magazine. It provides updated information about gay-owned, gay-oriented, and gay-friendly lodging, dining,

sightseeing, nightlife, and shopping establishments in destinations worldwide.

The following travel guides are available at many bookstores, or you can order them from any online bookseller: ***Spartacus International Gay Guide*** (Bruno Gmünder Verlag; www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide), ***Odysseus: The International Gay Travel Planner*** (Odysseus Enterprises Ltd.), and the ***Damron*** guides (www.damron.com), with separate, annual books for gay men and lesbians.

SENIOR TRAVEL

Seniors traveling in the region can bask in the glow of filial piety and the region's notorious Confucian respect for elders, but they are less likely to enjoy the major discounts found in the West. Mention the fact that you're a senior when you make your travel reservations, though. In some cases, people over 60 qualify for reduced admission to theaters, museums, and other attractions, as well as discounted fares on public transportation.

Members of **AARP** (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (✆ **888/687-2277;** www.aarp.org), often get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone 50 and older can join.

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (✆ **877/426-8056;** www.elderhostel.org) arranges study programs for those 55 and over. **ElderTreks** (✆ **800/741-7956;** www.eldertreks.com) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older. **INTRAV** (✆ **800/456-8100;** www.intrav.com) is a high-end tour operator that caters to the mature, discerning traveler (not specifically seniors), with trips around the world that include guided safaris, polar expeditions, private-jet adventures, and small-boat cruises down jungle rivers.

Recommended publications offering travel resources and discounts for seniors include the quarterly magazine ***Travel 50 & Beyond*** (www.travel50andbeyond.com); ***Travel Unlimited: Uncommon Adventures for the Mature Traveler*** (Avalon); ***101 Tips for Mature Travelers,*** available from Grand Circle Travel (✆ **800/221-2610** or 617/350-7500; www.gct.com); and ***Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50*** (McGraw-Hill), by Joann Rattner Heilman.

More and more seniors are considering Southeast Asia as a retirement destination. If you fall into this category, take a look at ***Retire to Asia*** (www.retiretoasia.com), an e-book by Ken Silver, or **www.retire-asia.com**, a highly informative website by a British expat living in Vientiane. Although it is geared toward those considering a move to the region, it also has some of the most up-to-date nuts-and-bolts travel information available online.

FAMILY TRAVEL

If you have enough trouble getting your kids out of the house in the morning, dragging them thousands of miles away might seem like an insurmountable challenge. The rough roads of Southeast Asia can be difficult, and concerns about communicable disease in rural areas should certainly be weighed. However, more accessible destinations and larger cities offer a glimpse into ancient civilizations and varied cultures that delight the kid in all of us. Most hotels can arrange extra beds at little additional cost, and connecting-room capability is common. To locate those accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that are particularly kid friendly, refer to the "Kids" icon throughout this guide.

Familyhostel (✆ **800/733-9753;** www.learn.unh.edu/familyhostel) takes the whole family, including kids 8 to 15,

on moderately priced U.S. and international learning vacations. Lectures, field trips, and sightseeing are guided by a team of academics.

Recommended family travel websites include **Family Travel Forum** (www.familytravelforum.com), **Family Travel Network** (www.familytravelnetwork.com), **Traveling Internationally with Your Kids** (www.travelwithyourkids.com), and **Family Travel Files** (www.thefamilytravelfiles.com).

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women traveling together or alone will find exploring this region particularly pleasant and easy. The Buddhist and Islamic codes of conduct and ethics followed by many mean that you will be treated with respect and courtesy.

Although you will almost never find local women dining or touring alone, as a visitor, your behavior will be accepted. You will rarely, if ever, be approached or hassled by strangers. At the same time, you can feel free to start a conversation with a stranger without fear of misinterpretation. ***Note:*** If you are traveling with a man, public displays of affection are not welcome, and it's you, the female, who will be scorned. Also, you will have to take even more care than your male counterpart to dress modestly, meaning no cleavage- or midriff-baring tops, miniskirts, or short shorts. Otherwise, you risk offending people on the grounds of either religious or local moral standards. Though wearing revealing clothing or sunbathing topless might appear to be tolerated, that's only because your hosts wish to avoid confrontation. Deep inside, it is very embarrassing.

It's still not advisable to take risks that you wouldn't normally take at home. Don't hitchhike, accept rides, or walk around late at night, particularly in dimly lit areas or in unfamiliar places. Be acutely aware of purse or jewelry snatchers in large cities. When meeting strangers in nightclubs, for example, buy your own drinks and keep an eye on them. In Cambodia, where a system of impunity prevails, precautions are highly recommended—and that includes within the temple complex of Angkor.

Check out the award-winning website **Journeywoman** (www.journeywoman.com), a "real-life" women's travel network where you can sign up for a free e-mail newsletter and get advice on everything from etiquette and dress to safety; or the travel guide ***Safety and Security for Women Who Travel,*** by Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer (Travelers' Tales, Inc.), offering common-sense tips on safe travel.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRAVELERS

Black Travel Online (www.blacktravelonline.com) posts news on upcoming events and includes links to articles and travel-booking sites.

Agencies and organizations that provide resources for black travelers include **Rodgers Travel** (✆ **800/825-1775;** www.rodgerstravel.com) and **Henderson Travel & Tours** (✆ **800/327-2309** or 301/650-5700; www.hendersontravel.com), which has specialized in trips to Africa since 1957.

For more information, check out the following collections and guides: ***Go Girl: The Black Woman's Guide to Travel & Adventure*** (Eighth Mountain Press), a compilation of travel essays by writers including Jill Nelson and Audre Lorde; ***Travel and Enjoy Magazine*** (✆ **866/266-6211;** www.travelandenjoy.com); and ***Pathfinders Magazine*** (✆ **877/977-PATH;** www.pathfinderstravel.com), which includes articles on everything from Rio de Janeiro to Ghana as well as information on upcoming ski, diving, golf, and tennis trips.

STUDENT TRAVEL

This region has become a hot destination for budget-minded students, who often hit the shores in Southeast Asia and travel for extended periods of time. From bases such as Bangkok's Khao San Road, backpackers roam the rugged highways and byways, paving the way for high-end tourism. Places

such as southern Thailand are attracting a young, spring-break crowd.

Any discounts to be found in Southeast Asia come from hard bargaining or tolerance for the most basic accommodations, but it's not a bad idea to have an **International Student Identity Card (ISIC),** which offers substantial savings on plane tickets and some entrance fees. It also provides you with basic health and life insurance and a 24-hour help line. The card is available from **STA Travel** (✆ **800/781-4040** in North America; www.statravel.com, or www.statravel.co.uk in the U.K.), the biggest student travel agency in the world. If you're no longer a student but are still under 26, you can get an **International Youth Travel Card (IYTC)** from the same people, and it entitles you to some discounts (but not on museum admissions). **Travel CUTS** (✆ **800/667-2887** or 416/614-2887; www.travelcuts.com) offers similar services for both Canadians and U.S. residents. Irish students may prefer to turn to **USIT** (✆ **01/602-1600;** www.usitnow.ie), an Ireland-based specialist in student, youth, and independent travel.

SINGLE TRAVELERS

By and large, travelers in Southeast Asia are seekers of some kind, so many prefer to go it alone. For independent travelers, solo journeys are opportunities to make friends and meet locals. There is also a certain camaraderie that develops on long bus rides or in the uncertainty and wonder shared with fellow travelers. A trip that starts out solo often ends in friendships that last a lifetime.

For advice about hopping off the track and finding your own path, check out **Vagabonding** (www.vagabonding.net), which has information both practical and spiritual about the ways of the wanderer. Another inspiration is ***The Art of Travel,*** by Alain de Botton (Penguin Press). For more practical information, check out Eleanor Berman's latest edition of ***Traveling Solo: Advice and Ideas for More Than 250 Great Vacations*** (Globe Pequot), which has advice on traveling alone, either solo or as part of a group tour.

If going by tour, it is important to know that single travelers are often hit with a "single supplement" to the base price. To avoid it, you can agree to room with other single travelers or find a compatible roommate before you go, from one of the many roommate-locator agencies.

Travel Buddies Singles Travel Club (✆ **800/998-9099;** www.travelbuddiesworldwide.com), based in Canada, runs small, intimate, single-friendly group trips and will match you with a roommate free of charge. **TravelChums** (✆ **212/787-2621;** www.travelchums.com) is an Internet-only travel-companion matching service with elements of a personals-type site, hosted by the respected New York–based Shaw Guides travel service.

Many reputable tour companies offer singles-only trips. **Singles Travel International** (✆ **877/765-6874;** www.singlestravelintl.com) offers singles-only trips to places such as London, Fiji, and the Greek Islands. **Backroads** (✆ **800/462-2848;** www.backroads.com) offers more than 160 active-travel trips to 30 destinations worldwide, including Bali, Morocco, and Costa Rica.

7 THE 21ST-CENTURY TRAVELER

INTERNET ACCESS AWAY FROM HOME

Internet cafes in Southeast Asia are many and affordable, preferable to expensive hotel business centers (you'll also meet lots of fellow travelers at Internet cafes). Of course, using your own laptop or PDA gives you the most flexibility, but

connections in hotels are expensive and wireless hotspots are, as yet, few.

Without Your Own Computer

In most parts of Southeast Asia, you'll find **Internet cafes** on every street corner. Be warned that rural destinations in places such as Laos have little or no service. Backpacker ghettos are always a good bet for finding cheap and reliable service. Avoid **hotel business centers** unless you're willing to pay exorbitant rates.

Most major airports now have **Internet kiosks** scattered throughout their gates. These give you basic Web access for a per-minute fee that's usually higher than cybercafe prices.

With Your Own Computer

More and more hotels, cafes, and retailers are signing on as Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) "hotspots." Some places provide **free wireless networks.** With your own wireless-capable computer, connection is a snap.

If Wi-Fi is not available, most business-class hotels offer dataports for laptop modems, some using an Ethernet network cable. You can bring your own cables, but most hotels offer them as well. In addition, major Internet service providers (ISPs) have **local access numbers** around the world, allowing you to go online by placing a local call. Check your ISP's website or call its toll-free number and ask how you can use your current account away from home, and how much it will cost.

Wherever you go, bring a **connection kit** of the right power and phone adapters, a spare phone cord, and a spare Ethernet network cable—or find out whether your hotel supplies them to guests.

Most Southeast Asian countries run on **220-volt electrical currents.** Some hotels have 110-volt service. Plugs are two-pronged, with either round or flat prongs. If you're coming from the U.S. and you must bring electrical appliances, bring your own converter and adapter (a surge protector is a good idea for a laptop, too). Check the "Fast Facts" section of individual country chapters for more details.

CELLPHONE USE

If your cellphone is on a GSM system, and you have a world-capable multiband phone, you can make and receive calls across civilized areas around much of the globe. Just call your wireless operator and ask for "international roaming" to be activated on your account. Unfortunately, per-minute charges can be high.

For many, **renting a phone** is a good idea. We suggest renting the phone before you leave home. North Americans can rent one before leaving home from **InTouch USA** (✆ **800/872-7626;** www.intouchglobal.com) or **RoadPost** (✆ **888/290-1606** or 905/272-5665; www.roadpost.com). InTouch will also, for free, advise you on whether your existing phone will work overseas; simply call ✆ **703/222-7161** between 9am and 4pm EST, or go to http://intouchglobal.com/travel.htm.

For trips of more than a few weeks spent in one country, **buying a phone** can be economically attractive, as many nations have cheap prepaid phone systems. Once you arrive at your destination, stop by a local cellphone shop and get the cheapest package.

True wilderness adventurers, or those heading to less-developed countries, should consider renting a **satellite phone ("satphone").** It's different from a cellphone in that it connects to satellites and works where there's no cellular signal or ground-based tower. Satphones are much more expensive to buy or rent than cellphones, however, and this cost, combined with the improved cellphone coverage throughout Southeast Asia, makes cellphones the much more sensible option.

8 GETTING THERE

BY PLANE

If you're flying to Southeast Asia, you will more than likely arrive via one of the region's three main hubs: Bangkok, Singapore, or Hong Kong, from where you can pick up flights to any other destination in Southeast Asia. Your home country's national carriers will almost certainly connect with all three of these airports. In addition, check with Southeast Asian–based airlines for fare deals: Cathay Pacific, Thai Airways, Malaysian Airlines, and Singapore Airlines. United also has direct flights between the U.S. West Coast and Vietnam.

9 ESCORTED GENERAL-INTEREST TOURS

Among the most experienced and knowledgeable tour operators specializing in Southeast Asia are **Absolute Asia** and **Asia Transpacific Journeys.** In-country tour providers **Diethelm** and **Exotissimo** can do anything from arranging deluxe tours to just helping out with small details or bookings. Most companies allow clients to design their own trip or deviate from exact schedules (often at a small cost). Companies such as **Intrepid,** among others, offer unique itineraries for solo travelers. See individual destination chapters for other in-country tour operators.

Here are the top outfitters:

- **Abercrombie & Kent** (1520 Kensington Rd., Ste. 212, Oakbrook, IL 60523; ✆ **800/554-7016;** fax 630/954-3324; www.abercrombieandkent.com) offers Southeast Asia programs with numerous comprehensive itineraries. This well-known luxury-tour operator can take you to Thailand (on spa tours, too), Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Laos, with stays at the finest hotels in Southeast Asia, such as the Oriental in Bangkok and the Sofitel Metropole in Hanoi.
- **Absolute Asia** (180 Varick St., 16th floor, New York, NY 10014; ✆ **800/736-8187;** fax 212/627-4090; www.absoluteasia.com), founded in 1989, offers an array of innovative itineraries, specializing in individual or small-group tours customized to your interests, with experienced local guides and excellent accommodations. Talk to these folks about tours that feature art, cuisine, religion, antiques, photography, wildlife study, archaeology, and soft adventure—they can plan a specialized trip to see just about anything you can dream up for any length of time. They can also book you on excellent coach programs in Indochina.
- **Asia Transpacific Journeys** (2995 Center Green Court, Boulder, CO 80301; ✆ **800/642-2742** or 303/443-6789; fax 303/443-7078; www.asiatranspacific.com) coordinates tours to every corner of South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It deals with small groups and custom programs that include luxury accommodations. The flagship package, the 23-day "Passage to Indochina" tour, takes you through the major attractions of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia with a well-planned itinerary, and it is but one of many fun tours that promote cultural understanding. It's a model of sustainable tourism and a highly recommended choice.
- **Backroads** (801 Cedar St., Berkeley, CA 94710; ✆ **800/462-2848** or 510/527-1555; fax 510/527-1444; www.backroads.com), the cycling and

hiking specialist, has an 11-day bike tour of Vietnam and Angkor Wat, an 8-day Thailand Golden Triangle tour, and others. Check out the website; Backroads is always coming up with innovative itineraries in the region.

- **Diethelm Travel** (Kian Gwan Building II, 140/1 Wireless Rd., Bangkok 10330, Thailand; ✆ **662/660-7000;** fax 662/660-7020; www.diethelmtravel.com), a Swiss-based tour company, has offices throughout the region (it's a popular choice for European tour groups). The folks here are friendly and helpful; they also operate as de facto tourist information centers in places such as Laos. Diethelm has full tour programs and, like Exotissimo (see below), can help with any details for travelers in-country, arrange car rental or vans for small groups, and offer discount options to all locations.
- **Exotissimo Travel** (40 bis, Rue du fg Poissonniére, 75010 Paris, France, ✆ **149/490-360,** fax 149/490-369; or Saigon Trade Center, 37 Ton Duc Thang, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, ✆ **08/825-1723,** fax 08/829-5800; www.exotissimo.com), a French outfit and outbound (in-country) agency with offices in every major city in the region, has excellent guides on-site. Agents not only can arrange all-inclusive tours, but also are helpful with all travel details, from ticketing to visas. See the office locations in each chapter.
- **Imaginative Traveler** (1 Betts Ave., Martlesham Heath, Suffolk IP5 7RH, U.K.; ✆ **0800/316-2717;** fax 0280/742-3045; www.imaginative-traveler.com), a U.K.-based firm, gets rave reviews for organizing all sorts of bicycling, trekking, and motorcycling adventures throughout Southeast Asia, particularly Indochina.
- **Intrepid Travel** (11 Spring St., Fitzroy, Victoria, 3065 Australia; ✆ **613/9473-2626,** or 877/488-1616 in the U.S.; fax 613/9419-4426; www.intrepidtravel.com), a popular Australian operator, is probably the best choice for an off-the-beaten-track tour of Asia. Intrepid caters trips for the culturally discerning, those with humanitarian goals, those in search of comfort and adventure, those on a budget, or those looking for a looser structure and lots of options. Its name is its motto, and with some of the best guides in Asia, these folks will take you to the back of beyond safely, in style, and with lots of laughs.

10 SPECIAL-INTEREST TRIPS

For cultural tours and museum tours, contact any of the smaller local travel agents listed in each chapter. For the amateur ethnographer, contact any of the ecotour outfitters below or those listed in specific sections (particularly in the north of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, or western Cambodia).

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES & ECOTOURS

Adventure-seekers can find any number of small outfitters in many parts of Southeast Asia. Consider first what kind of terrain you'd like to explore—the choices are anything from jungle to dry plains, coastal estuaries to inland rivers. The best areas to get out and get your boots wet are in the farthest reaches of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

In the north of Thailand, go with **Contact Travel** (420/3 Changklan Road., Chiang Mai; ✆ **05320-4664;** fax 05327-9505; www.activethailand.com) for cycling, off-road, and other ecoadventures. In the far south of Thailand, **Paddle Asia** (9/71 Thanon Rasdanusorn, Phuket; ✆ **07624-0952;** fax 07621-6145; www.paddleasia.com) has some of the best

nature kayaking trips—you're guaranteed to see some exciting wildlife.

In Laos, **Green Discovery** (P.O. Box 9811, Hang Boun Rd., Ban Hay Sook, Vientaine; ✆ **021/264528;** www.greendiscoverylaos.com) runs great rafting and kayaking adventures anywhere in the country and has some unique village and cultural tours as well.

In the north of Vietnam, the folks at **Handspan** (80 Ma May St., Hanoi; ✆ **04/04/926-2828;** fax 04/926-2383; www.handspan.com) as well as **Buffalo Tours** (94 Ma May St., Hanoi; ✆ **04/828-0702;** www.buffalotours.com) put together exciting kayaking adventures in Halong Bay, hiking trips to Sapa, and jeep trips up to Dien Bien Phu. In central Vietnam, the old French colonial hill station of Dalat plays host to a great outfitter, **Phat Tire Ventures** (73 Truong Cong Dinh, Dalat; ✆ **063/829-422;** fax 063/820-331; www.phattireventures.com), which can help you rock climb, mountain bike, or trek with the most professional guides and experienced technicians.

In Malaysia, **Asian Overland Services** (✆ **03/4252-9100;** fax 03/4257-1133; www.asianoverland.com.my) offers homestays in Taman Negara national park, Lemanak longhouse stays (Sarawak), diving off Sipadan Island, and a number of diverse tours planned with sensitivity to the environment and local cultures.

In Bali, **Sobek Tours** (✆ **361/287059**), **Bali Discovery Tours** (✆ **361/286283;** www.balidiscovery.com), and **Bali Adventure Tours** (✆ **361/721480;** www.baliadventuretours.com) can both arrange fun day and overnight itineraries to volcanoes, the jungle, and rural villages.

The folks at **Exotissimo Travel** have offices throughout Southeast Asia and are the best for arranging all kinds of rural adventures. See individual chapters for office locations.

DIVING TRIPS There are more dive outfits in Southeast Asia than we could possibly list. Be sure to choose a PADI-accredited dive company and ask lots of questions before any trip: What is the ratio of diver to instructor? Does the company have its own boat?

For details, check specific chapters of this book. In Thailand, look under **Phuket** or **Ko Tao;** in Vietnam, try **Nha Trang;** in Cambodia, **Sihanoukville;** in Malaysia, **Langkawi.**

COOKING SCHOOLS The varied cuisine of the countries of Southeast Asia is a veritable banquet for the gourmet or the fearless eater, and there's no better way to learn about and participate in a culture than to take a cooking class. Opportunities abound.

In Thailand, a favorite option is the upscale **Blue Elephant Restaurant and Cooking School** (233 S. Sathorn Rd., Bangkok; ✆ **02673-9353;** www.blueelephant.com), set in an old mansion in the heart of the city. The restaurant is a popular luxury chain from Europe that has returned to its roots and set up shop in the Thai capital. It's not to be missed. In the north of Thailand, try the **Chiang Mai Cookery School** (47/2 Moonmuang Rd., Chiang Mai; ✆ **05320-6388;** www.thaicookeryschool.com). In the far south, there are lots of small resorts with cooking schools attached.

In northern Laos, enjoy a fun and informative day at **Tamnak Lao Restaurant and Cooking School** (Sakhalin Rd., Ban Wat Sene, Luang Prabang; ✆ **071/252-525**), where you'll not only get the dish on Lao specialties and some unique derivations, but also learn a good bit about local culture, history, and language.

In central Vietnam, Ms. Vy, who runs the **Mermaid (Nhu Y) Restaurant** (02 Tran Phu St., Hoi An; ✆ **0510/861-527;** www.hoianhospitality.com) and several other establishments in town, offers great cooking programs of varying length.

Gourmands in Singapore shouldn't miss a chance to take a quick course at the

Raffles Culinary Academy (✆ **65/6412-1256;** www.raffles.com). Whole-day courses on Asian and Western haute cuisine are led by chefs from the grand hotel's acclaimed restaurants.

In Bali, try **Bumbu Bali** (✆ **361/774502**) in the south for Heinz von Holzen's informative cooking classes. The Alila Manggis' **Sea Salt** restaurant (✆ **363/41011**) holds cooking classes with chef Penny Williams. Executive chef Chris Salans gives gourmet French-Indonesian cooking classes at his restaurant **Mosaic** (✆ **361/975768**), which is also well worth a trip for a meal.

11 GETTING AROUND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Regional flights in Southeast Asia are affordable and convenient—a great way to get around if your time is short. That said, half the fun of traveling is getting there—many walk away from land travel in this part of the world saying, "I'll never do it again, but what a trip!" When the massive Soviet 4×4 nearly lays on its side in the deep ruts of a washed-out road in Laos, or that rattletrap motorbike you rented in hill-tribe country in the north of Vietnam catches a flat and leaves you stranded, you might curse yourself or the very road you're on, but you'll have lots of stories to tell when you get back.

BY PLANE

Myriad routes into the region are served by international carriers, including Silk Air (the regional arm of Singapore Airlines), Malaysia Airlines, Thai Airways, Cathay Pacific, Vietnam Airlines, and Garuda Indonesia. Domestic carriers include Pelangi Air, AirAsia, and Berjaya Air in Malaysia; Lao Airlines in Laos; and Bangkok Airways and P.B. Air in Thailand and Cambodia.

Remember that international airports are not restricted to capital cities. In addition to Bangkok, Thailand has international access via Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai (to China and Laos), U-Tapao and Phuket (to Cambodia), and Phuket and Ko Samui (to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur). You can fly into Malaysia at Penang, Langkawi, and Tioman Island, and to Borneo destinations direct from Singapore. Laos has international access at both Luang Prabang and Pakse, in addition to the capital, Vientiane. Vietnam has international flights to both Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and Hanoi. And in Cambodia, you can fly directly to Siem Reap, the access city to Angkor Wat, from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, U-Tapao (near Pattaya), Phuket, Vientiane, Vietnam, and Singapore.

Check out the UNESCO World Heritage routes, a new schedule of flights offered by Bangkok Airways. Originating in Bangkok, this tour connects Sukhothai (Thailand) with Luang Prabang (Laos), Hue (Vietnam), and Angkor Wat (Cambodia).

Ask any travel agent for information, and be sure to research all flight options for the most direct routes and best fares. Each chapter gives specific details for booking.

BY TRAIN

With a few exceptions, trains that operate throughout Southeast Asia are poorly maintained, overcrowded, and slow. While trains used to be a good option for long distances, the recent increase in budget airlines offering rock-bottom prices has made train travel a less appealing option. The most popular rail route—and the only one with interconnecting service among countries in all of Southeast Asia—runs from Singapore to Bangkok (and vice versa) through the heart of the Malaysian peninsula, with stops along the way at the

cities of Johor Bahru, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, and Butterworth (for Penang). It takes 6 hours from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, and another 35 hours from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok. You can board the train at the Singapore Railway Station in Tanjong Pagar, at the Kuala Lumpur Central Railway Station on Jalan Hishamuddin, and in Bangkok at the Hua Lamphong Railway Station on Rama IV Road.

Upscale travelers with unlimited budgets can book passage on one of the world's foremost luxury trains, the *Eastern & Oriental Express,* which covers the distance between Singapore and Bangkok in 42 hours. Find more details in the Thailand chapter.

Reliable rail service also runs north to south along coastal Vietnam, with interesting new luxury cars that connect Hanoi, the capital, with the northern hill country and make a further connection to the vast rail networks of China.

BY BUS

Buses are good on the budget and often the best way into the back of beyond. Bus trips in the region range from VIP tours with air-conditioning and video monitors to rattletrap, overcrowded, broken-down mobiles. Thai and Malay buses are quite reliable and a good option, connecting the far north of Thailand with the far southern tip of Malaysia and on to Singapore. In Laos and Cambodia, local buses, with the exception of a few interior routes, are rough. Check specific "Getting There" sections in individual chapters before embarking on long hauls. Also, check each country's individual visa requirements, as you often need to prearrange visas for land crossings.

BY BOAT

There are lots of boat adventures in the region. More and more travelers are heading down the Mekong, starting from the town of Chiang Khong in northern Thailand and ending in Luang Prabang in Laos. Luxury riverboats run the same trip, as well as trips in the far south of Laos between Pakse and Si Phan Don (look for LuangSay Cruises under the relevant sections). Boat trips in Vietnam's Halong Bay, just east of Hanoi, are very popular; outfitters such as Handspan and Buffalo Tours run great excursions. Don't miss the new boat connections along the Mekong tributaries between Vietnam's Mekong Delta and Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. Boats also connect Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, with Siem Reap, the town that supports Angkor Wat, along the Mekong as it flows through Tonle Sap Lake.

BY CAR

Car rental is affordable in Southeast Asia. In the developing countries—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia—it is a good idea (and costs not much more) to hire a car with driver. Insurance is often unavailable. Road rules vary, and in some places seem nonexistent—though there is always a method to the madness—so it's not a bad idea to spring for a driver where affordable. Be sure to research details and invest in good maps before heading out.

12 TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Affordable luxury is the name of the game in the countries of Southeast Asia. For what you might pay for a cracker-box room in big cities in the U.S. and Europe, you can go in style in Indochina and the countries on the Malay Peninsula. Pay more than $100, and you'll live like royalty. Budget travelers and young backpackers flock to the region, and a big part of the charm is spending $2 to $5 per night; it makes the budget go on and on. If your trip is short, live it up. Go for a luxury

room and take advantage of affordable spa treatments (at a fraction of what you'd pay elsewhere). Midrange boutique hotels and rustic ecofriendly rural resorts are also a new trend as developers discover that *refurbished* is cool, and that location—whether overlooking the Mekong or set in a tropical rainforest—is everything.

You'll find many of the major chains represented in the region. **Sheraton** has hotels throughout Thailand, Singapore, and in the major stops in Vietnam. **InterContinental** has high-end business properties in Hanoi, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, and Singapore. **Hilton** has fine properties in Hanoi (Vietnam), Bangkok and Phuket (Thailand), throughout Malaysia and Singapore, and on Bali. The French hoteliers at **Accor** host a number of **Sofitel** and **Novotel** hotels in the region; many of the big-city properties are aimed at the business market, but in Vietnam Sofitel takes the cake with some of the most unique refurbished hotels going, and in Cambodia it has a top resort as well. **Four Seasons** has fine properties in Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and outside of Chiang Mai. **JW Marriott** has a hotel in Bangkok and a luxury resort on Phuket. **Le Meridien** boasts top resorts and golf in Thailand and Bali (Indonesia).

There are also a few good local chains. The **Amari** group is a Swiss-managed hotel chain with semiluxurious properties in all of the major stops in Thailand; service is conscientious and there is a good consistency among its many hotels (and good rates). In Vietnam, and now Cambodia, the **Victoria** hotels are a charming blend of atmosphere and connection to place, without sacrificing all of the comforts of home. **Pansea** hotels, now individually branded under the management of the luxury **Orient Express** group, host some of the most luxurious sanctuaries that take you away from it all but remind you of local culture—find them in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. **Aman Resorts** are in a class all their own, with their sprawling villa properties in Indonesia, Cambodia, and soon in Laos, all at rock-star prices.

Villa rental is a popular choice in island destinations. Balinese villas are a particular steal, best over a longer period of time and with hired staff. In places such as Thailand's Phuket, you'll find timeshares and long-term rates for private, serviced, beachside places that are quite enticing (beware the hard sell, though).

Each of the countries in Southeast Asia sets its own star standards for hotels, usually one through five. Note that a five-star might only be rated so because of the quantity, not quality, of services offered.

13 TIPS ON DINING

Southeast Asia is a real playground for adventurous eaters; from high-class hotel restaurants and power-lunch points to street-side stalls with local specialties, you'll find it all. The cuisine of each country is unique, and crossing borders often means a new course in manners, food, and culture. In this guide, we list the safest of options by and large, making sure to designate any dining that could be deemed "adventurous"—but the adventurous in fact have lots of opportunities to try new foods, from oddities such as freshly killed snake to fried crickets and grubs. It's not all that funky, though, and much of the best local cuisine is not found in restaurants but in markets and street-side stalls, something that puts some people off. Our advice: Be adventurous. When eating in open-air joints, just be careful that things are cooked fresh and aren't sitting out, and be careful of raw ingredients such as vegetables or some

fish pastes. If you find yourself playing charades to get your food, laughing, smiling, and squatting on a tiny plastic stool, talking to locals and eating a meal that costs pennies to the approving nods of your new friends, then you're in the right place. Wherever possible, ask locals what's good, and you'll be in store for a fun cultural adventure.

Try *pho* and the many regional specials throughout Vietnam; enjoy counter-the-table spreads in Thailand and Malaysia, where spices are fiery and a meal is always an event; and don't miss crispy duck or *babi guling*—suckling pig—in Bali. The choices are endless. The usual varieties of international fare can be found throughout the region—in fact, every big city has its Chinese, Italian, sushi, and French. In parts of Indochina, Laos and Vietnam in particular, chefs carry on long traditions from colonial times, and the French cuisine is as good as you'll get anywhere. Chinese communities abound and, of course, so does good Chinese in its myriad forms—from dim sum to Peking duck.

All but the fanciest restaurants are open early until late. Tipping is not expected but always appreciated, and just rounding up the bill to the next dollar amount is often more than enough.

For drinkers, there are few restrictive laws or cultural taboos—in fact, drinking is a big part of most cultures in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia and much of Indonesia, however, Islamic rules do not permit the consumption of alcohol, but non-Muslim visitors are welcome to drink as long as they are respectful of their Muslim hosts. Local rice wines and whiskeys abound, and foreign guests are always invited. Sometimes the stuff is pretty potent—toxic, even—so be warned. European visitors left their mark on the region with brewing and distilling technologies, and each country produces its own local beers to go along with the many imports. Fresh fruit is falling off the trees in the tropical climes of Southeast Asia, so good fresh juices are available everywhere. Coffee is grown throughout the region, and though local roasting processes are a bit different, local brews are delicious. Tap water is not potable in most regions, but bottled water is available everywhere; and perhaps the best advice for travel in the region is to stay hydrated. If you're thirsty, then it's too late. Drink lots.

14 SUGGESTED ITINERARIES

Routes through the region are as varied as the ragtag bunch that travels them. With the many convenient air connections, you can choose your destinations and connect them as you like, but here are a few suggestions to get you started.

TOURING INDOCHINA Clockwise or counterclockwise routes starting in Bangkok and including northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia are popular and avoid boring backtracking. Connecting northern Thailand with Laos by boat is appealing, and flying from Vientiane, the Lao capital, to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City is a better choice than the rough overland route (which also leaves you in the middle of the north-south route, whereas a flight will get you to a terminus). After a sweep down the coast of Vietnam, connect with Cambodia overland (or by boat from the Mekong Delta) and continue on to Angkor Wat by bus, boat, or plane. There is frequent air service between Angkor Wat and Bangkok.

This itinerary can take anywhere from a few weeks to 6 months, depending on your inclinations. Highlights include the historic temple towns of Thailand, hill-tribe treks throughout the region, sleepy Luang Prabang, busy Hanoi and Ho Chi

Minh City (Saigon), all of the stops along coastal Vietnam (historical and recreational), and, of course, Angkor Wat. After a trip like this, you'll have earned your time on the beaches of Thailand, Malaysia, or Bali.

HEADING DOWN THE MALAY PENINSULA Starting in Bangkok and heading south, you can connect the major resort destinations of southern Thailand with a tour down the length of Malaysia to Singapore and end up in Bali.

You can do this trip in a fly-by-night week or stretch it out over a few months. Highlights include pristine beaches (maybe even *The Beach*) in Thailand; great food, affordable cosmopolitan comforts, and cultural stops in Malaysia; "shop-till-you-drop" spending in Singapore; and the tranquil beaches of Bali.

BASING YOURSELF IN A HUB From Bangkok, Singapore, or other major urban centers, travelers can make short forays into the countryside or to the resort of their choice from a comfortable, familiar base in a big city with all the comforts of home. Many visitors aim for the cultural and historic sights recommended by UNESCO—places such as Luang Prabang (Laos); Hoi An, Hue, and Halong Bay (Vietnam); Sukhothai and Ayuthaya (Thailand); and the temples of Angkor Wat (Cambodia)—all reachable via larger cities. Or start in a comfy hub and connect with local outfitters for short adventure trips before coming back to hot showers and room service.

15 RECOMMENDED BOOKS & FILMS

BALI (INDONESIA) *Bali Sekala and Nishkala: Essays on Religion, Ritual and Art,* by Fred B. Eiseman, Jr., is the seminal text on the labyrinth of beliefs and practices on the island. The last third of Elizabeth Gilbert's bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love,* takes place in Bali's Ubud and gives a great sense of the place's people and culture.

CAMBODIA Henry Kamm's *Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land* is a good start to finding some context to the country's late troubles. *Brother Number One: A Political Biography,* by David P. Chandler, provides insight into the insanity of the Khmer Rouge.

There are many personal accounts by survivors of the years of violence and chaos in Cambodia. *Stay Alive, My Son,* by Pin Yathay, and *First They Killed My Father,* by Loung Ung, are both heart-wrenching stories of life under genocide in the mid-1970s.

With the reopening of Cambodia's borders to international aid came another era of chaos, this one marked by a general lawlessness and unrestrained vice. *The Quality of Mercy,* by William Shawcross, examines the international response to Cambodia's post–Khmer Rouge refugee crisis, while *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja,* by Amit Gilboa, is a portrait of that time.

On film, the best depiction of Cambodia is *The Killing Fields,* a 1984 movie about the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the last days of freedom in Phnom Penh. *City of Ghosts,* a moody film by Matt Dillon, captures a certain feel of the country's underbelly, and *Tomb Raider* is a fanciful romp that was filmed at Angkor in 2000.

LAOS *Stalking the Elephant Kings,* by C. Kremmer, is a personal account of travel in Laos and one man's obsession to find the truth about the last dynasty—it's a good primer to Lao history and culture. *Another Quiet American,* by Brett Dakin, a witty account of recent travels in the country, paints the state of the nation through the eyes of a young American working as a consultant for the National Tourism Authority in Vientiane.

The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos and *Air America: The Story of the CIA's Secret Airline,* both by C. Robbins, tell the heretofore untold tale of the undeclared war in Laos. And *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* is a memoir by Dr. Charles Weldon, recalling his experiences from 1963 to 1974 working hand-in-hand with Air America as chief of public health for USAID Laos.

MALAYSIA A witty and gripping travelogue, *Into the Heart of Borneo* by Redmond O'Hanlon follows two inexperienced travelers as they attempt a rugged trek into the deepest forests of Sarawak.

For a deeper look at Malaysian history, try *A History of Malaysia* by Barbara Watson Andaya, or *The Long Day Wanes: A Malaysian Trilogy* by Anthony Burgess, each of which mirrors the author's experiences and observations as a British civil servant during Malaysia's transition to independence.

SINGAPORE If you're having trouble finding books about Singapore in bookstores where you live, wait until you arrive and then browse local shelves, where you'll find tons of books about the country and its history, culture, arts, food, and local fiction. For interesting and informative reads that you can find (or order) through your neighborhood bookstore, here's a good place to start:

From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000, by Lee Kuan Yew, details the history and policies behind Singapore's remarkable economic success written by the man who was at the helm.

The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew by Lee Kuan Yew offers an intimate account of Minister Mentor Lee's personal journey and will unravel some of the mysteries behind one of the world's most talked-about leaders.

King Rat by James Clavell is a novel set in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation and follows the story of an American POW as he struggles to outwit the system in a harsh prison camp.

Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad is a classic narrative of a man's struggle to find redemption in a Southeast Asian post.

THAILAND *Anna and the King,* the original late-19th-century work of Anna Leowens, governess for the children of the progressive King Rama IV, tells of the kingdom's opening to the West. Don't miss the film of the same name starring Jodie Foster (though due to gross historical inaccuracies, the film was banned from public release in Thailand).

Also banned in Thailand is *The Revolutionary King,* by William Stevenson, a biography of the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Given unprecedented access to the king and royal family, Stevenson shows a side of the monarchy that few have seen. The book treats His Majesty as a real person (referring to him by his nickname, "Lek," meaning small) and delves into taboo subjects, such as the murder of the king's older brother Ananda, making it quite controversial.

The Beach, by Alex Garland, and the popular film of the same name featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, tells the tale of the impossibility of modern Utopia, the very thing that so many Asia adventurers seek. Though not about Thailand exclusively, Tiziano Terzani's *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* is a well-crafted portrait of the interlocking cultures of Asia and of the Westerner's search for personal destiny.

Carol Hollinger's *Mai Pen Rai Means Nevermind* is a personal history of time spent in the kingdom some 30 years ago, but the cultural insights are quite current. *Patpong Sisters,* by Cleo Odzer, and *Sex Slaves,* by Louise Brown, are both interesting exposés of the Thai sex industry.

Books on Thai Buddhism are many. Try Phra Peter Parrapadipo's *Phra Farang,* literally "The Foreign Monk," which tells the story of an Englishman turned Thai

Buddhist monk. The writings of Jack Kornfield, particularly *A Path with Heart,* are a good introduction.

VIETNAM *The Quiet American,* by Graham Greene, which was made into a Hollywood film starring Michael Caine in 2002, is a classic tale of espionage in the old colony. In fact, much of what is written—or popular—about Vietnam chronicles the country's recent strife, particularly the American War years. The list is long; below are but a few.

In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, by former American secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara and Brian DeMark, is quite popular in Vietnam (a copy stands in a glass case at the War Museum in Ho Chi Minh City), as it tells the tale of American deceit and misinformation from the perspective of one of its more remorseful arbiters. *A Bright Shining Lie,* by Neil Sheehan, is a similar explication. Pulitzer Prize–winning *Fire in the Lake,* by Francis Fitzgerald, is a sociological exploration of the war years and aftermath.

Personal accounts such as *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam,* by Bernhard Edelman, or the Vietnamese classic *The Sorrow of War,* by Bao Ninh, tell of the experiences of soldiers and civilians caught in the fray. *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc and the Photograph That Changed the Course of the Vietnam War,* by Denise Chong, is self-explanatory.

Robert Olen Butler won a Pulitzer Prize for *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* a collection of short stories recounting the legacy of war through disparate voices. This book is one of the best you can read while traveling in the country. *Catfish and Mandala,* by Andrew X. Pham, is a Vietnamese American's travel odyssey and coming to terms with the past.

The Vietnam War was fertile terrain for Hollywood in the 1980s, with award-winning classics such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter* with Robert DeNiro, and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July,* a true story about returnee Ron Kovic. *The Fog of War* is a uniquely candid hindsight look by Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense during the war. Films such as Tran Anh Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya* and *Cyclo* are more tranquil, studied views of Vietnamese culture. And *Indochine,* starring Catherine Deneuve, is a historic portrait of the tumultuous end of colonialism in Vietnam.

4

Thailand

by Ron Emmons

Traffic and tranquillity, beaches and bargains, ancient palaces and stunning temples: Thailand has much to offer the millions who visit every year. The world caught on to Thailand's magic years ago, and foreign investors, with the encouragement of the Thai government, have seized on this fascination. Luxury resorts are popping up in virtually every town and island, turning once remote and unspoiled beaches and towns into bustling package-tour destinations, some virtually unrecognizable to those just a couple years removed from their last visit.

Bangkok's space-age airport, Suvarnabhumi, with the capacity to handle 45 million travelers a year (and eventually 100 million with planned expansion), has made Thailand an even more convenient destination for the growing number of visitors.

That's not to say Thailand has lost its charm; far from it. The authentic Thai way of life with its vibrant Buddhist culture is just outside the comfortable bubble of five-star resorts and luxury tour buses: All you have to do is wander the streets and soak it in.

In bustling Bangkok, find canal and riverside communities, a sprawling Chinatown, an ultramodern cityscape, and giant outdoor markets that are a heady mix of sights, sounds, and smells.

Beyond urban Thailand are flat plains carpeted with rice paddies and dotted with tiny villages; mountains of luxuriant teak forests where elephants once roamed wild; long stretches of white-sand beach; acres of coconut palms and rubber plantations; and clear-blue waters against towering rock cliffs. Rural life is languid and hospitable, and behind every warm Thai smile there is true kindness.

Outdoor-adventure opportunities abound: sail, paddle, dive, and snorkel in the sea; trek to villages; ride the rivers; or go on four-wheel-drive adventures in the rugged upcountry. Rural Thailand is ripe for exploration by bus, train, car, motorbike, and boat, and visitors are limited only by their tolerance for adventure.

Gorgeous tropical island beaches play host to laid-back bungalow guesthouses and posh, Thai-style five-star resorts. The cuisine is captivating, a unique blend of sweet, sour, and salty tastes tempered with fiery spice. And whether shopping the sprawling bazaars or visiting Thailand's notorious nightlife, you're sure to have some *sanuk,* or fun, Thai style.

1 GETTING TO KNOW THAILAND

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Thailand is in the center of Southeast Asia, roughly equidistant from China and India, and shares cultural affinities with both. It borders Myanmar (Burma) to the north and west, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia (Kampuchea) to the east, and Malaysia to the

south. Thailand's southwestern coast stretches along the Andaman Sea, and its southern and southeastern coastlines bor der the G ulf of Thailand (still often called the G ulf of Siam).

Thailand covers approximately 289,668 sq. km (112,970 sq. miles)—about the size of France—and its shape is often compar ed to an elephant's head. The country is divided into six major geographic zones, within which there are 73 provinces.

The Regions in Brief

NORTHERN THAILAND Northern Thailand (the forehead of the elephant) is a r elatively cool, mountainous region at the foothills of the Himalayas. Like most of Thailand, the cool hills in the nor th ar e w ell suited for farming, par ticularly for strawberries, asparagus, peaches, litchis, and other fr uits. At higher elevations, a few hill-tribe farmers still cultivate opium poppies (a cr op that is r uinous to farmers who become addicted), though the Royal Projects agricultural program advanced by the king is introducing more productive crops such as cabbage and coffee. The cities in the nor th that ar e covered in this chapter are Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

THE CENTRAL PLAIN The Central Plain is an extremely fertile region, providing the country and the world with much of its abundant rice cr op. The main city of the area is Phitsanulok, northeast of which are the impressive remains of Sukhothai, Thailand's first capital. To the south is Lopburi, an ancient M on-Khmer settlement.

THE SOUTHEAST COAST The southeast coast features several seaside resorts, such as Pattaya and the islands K o Samet and Ko Chang. They are nearer to B angkok than the best beaches on the S outhern Peninsula, so are quicker to reach.

WESTERN THAILAND On the opposite side of the countr y, w est of B angkok, ar e mountains and valleys carved by the Kwai River, made infamous during World War II by the "Death Railway," built by Allied prisoners of war who wor ked and lived under horrifying conditions, and a bridge (featur ed in the film *Bridge on the Riv er Kwai*) over the river at Kanchanaburi. Just 80km (50 miles) north of Bangkok (which is in every way the center of the countr y, on the banks of the Chao P hraya River) is Ayutthaya, which was Siam's second capital after S ukhothai.

THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA The long, narrow Southern Peninsula (the elephant's trunk) extends south to the M alaysian border. It was on the west coast of the peninsula, in the Andaman Sea, that the "Christmas Tsunami" struck on December 26, 2004. The result of a 9.0 ear thquake in Aceh Indonesia, the waves claimed 5,000 victims in Thailand alone. Coastal P huket was buffeted b y the waves, while ar eas in P hang Nga P rovince, particularly Khao Lak, as well as the popular resort island of Ko Phi Phi near Krabi, were flattened. H owever, reconstruction was fast and r ecovery of tourist centers is no w complete.

The eastern coastline along the G ulf of Thailand extends more than 1,802km (1,117 miles), while the western shoreline runs 716km (444 miles) along the Andaman Sea. This region is the most tr opical in the countr y, with heavy rainfall during monsoon seasons. The northeast monsoon, roughly from November to April, brings clear weather and calm seas to the west coast; the southwest monsoon, March to October, brings similar conditions to the east coast. There are glamorous beach r esorts here (people visit them ev en during the rainy season, as it rar ely rains all day), such as the w estern islands of P huket and nearby Ko Phi Phi. The east-coast islands of Ko Samui and Ko Phangan are similarly appealing.

Chiang Saen
Chiang Khong
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
Fang
Chiang Rai
Mae Hong Son
Pai
NORTHERN HILLS
Mae Yum Nat'l Park
Yom
Mekong
LAOS
VIETNAM
Nan
Chiang Mai
Lamphun
Lampang
Mae Sariang
Wang
Phrae
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Si Satchanalai
Uttaradit
Loei
Udon Thani
Ban Chiang
Nakhon Phanom
Sukhothai
MAE KHONG VALLEY
Tak
Phitsanulok
Chi
Mae Sot
CENTRAL PLAINS
Khon Kaen
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Kamphaeng Phet
Ping
Phetchabun
ISAN
Nakhon Sawan
Khao Yai Nat'l Park
Phimai
Mun
Khwae Noi
Lopburi
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)
Ubon Ratchathani
WESTERN THAILAND
Chao Phraya
Surin
Ayutthaya
Nam Tok
Thap Lan Nat'l Park
Sam Rong
Phu Chong Na Yoi Nat'l Park
Kanchanaburi
Bangkok
Nakhom Pathom
Chon Buri
Andaman Sea
Phetchaburi
Cha-Am
Bangsaen
CAMBODIA
Kaeng Krachan Nat'l Park
Hua Hin
Pattaya
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Rayong
Chanthaburi
Ko Samet
CHANTHABURI PROVINCE
Isthmus of Kra
SOUTHEASTERN COAST
Ko Chang
Trat
Chumphon
Phnom Penh
Ko Tao
Ranong
Ko Mak
Ko Phangngan
Ko Kut
Ko Surin
Ko Ang Thong Marine Nat'l Park
Ko Samui
Mu Ko Surin Archipelago National Marine Park
Khanom
Surat Thani
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Phangnga
SOUTHERN PENINSULA
Gulf of Thailand
(Gulf of Siam)
VIETNAM
Phuket
Krabi
Ko Pi Pi
Songkhla
Andaman Sea
Hat Yai
Pattani
Ko Tarutao
Ko Tarutao Nat'l Marine Park
Narathiwat
MALAYSIA
Sungai Kolok
0
100 mi
0
100 km

ISAN Finally, Isan, the broad and relatively infertile northeast plateau (the ear of the elephant), is the least developed region in Thailand, bordered by the Mekong River (Mae Nam Khong in Thai). Isan is dusty in the cool winter and muddy during the summer monsoon. Fewer tourists make their way to Isan than any other part of the country, so we've opted not to cover it in this chapter.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Archaeologists believe that Thailand was a major thoroughfare for *Homo erectus* en route from Africa to China and other parts of Asia. Modern civilization did not arrive in Thailand until about 1,000 years ago, when waves of people migrated from central and southern China, settling primarily in what is now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma). These people, who are called *Tai,* became dispersed over a vast area of space, sharing a cultural and linguistic commonality. The **early Tais** lived in nuclear families with household collectives, called *muang,* or village, establishing loosely structured feudal states.

From the 6th century, Southeast Asia underwent a gradual period of **Indianization.** Merchants and missionaries from India introduced Brahmanism and Buddhism to the region, as well as Indian political and social values and art and architectural preferences. At the same time the **Mon,** migrants from Burma, were responsible for establishing Sri Lankan Buddhism in central Thailand.

By the early 9th century, the expansionist **Khmer** empire had risen to power in Cambodia, engulfing the region. Magnificent Khmer temples, originally built for the worship of Hindu deities before conversion to Buddhism and distinguished by their corncob-shaped *prang,* or towers, were constructed in outposts increasingly farther afield until the Khmer's eventual collapse in the 13th century. You can still find many Khmer ruins in Thailand, especially in Isan.

In 1259, several powerful centers of Tai power in northern Thailand, southern China, and Laos were united by **King Mengrai,** who established the first capital of the **Lanna Kingdom** at Chiang Rai in 1263, and later at Chiang Mai in 1296. The Lanna Kingdom saw the rise of a scholarly Buddhism, with strict adherence to orthodox ways. Citizens enjoyed the benefits of infrastructure projects for transportation and irrigation, developed medicine and law, and created artistic expression through religious sculpture, sacred texts, and poetry. But the Mongols, under the fierce expansionist leadership of **Kublai Khan,** forced their way into the region. Mengrai, forming strategic alliances with neighboring kingdoms, succeeded in keeping the Mongols at bay.

In the vacuum left by the departing Khmers, a tiny kingdom based in **Sukhothai** rose to fame after its crown prince, Rama, single-handedly defeated an invasion from neighboring Mae Sot at the Burmese border. Upon his coronation in 1279, **Ramkhamhaeng,** or "Rama the Bold," set the scene for what is recognized as the first truly Siamese civilization, mixing all the people of the central plains—Tai, Mon, Khmer, and indigenous populations, with threads of India and China interwoven in their cultural tapestry. In response to the Khmer's hierarchical rule, Ramkhamhaeng established himself as an accessible king. He was a devout Buddhist, adopting orthodox and scholarly Theravada Buddhism. A patron of the arts, the king commissioned many great Buddha images, initiated splendid architectural projects, and developed the modern Thai written language. After his death in 1298, his successors failed to rule wisely, and Sukhothai's brilliant spark faded almost as quickly at it had ignited.

Next came the kingdom of **Ayutthaya,** which swallowed what was left of Khmer outposts and the Sukhothai Kingdom. Incorporating the strengths of its population—Tai military manpower and labor, Khmer bureaucratic sensibilities, and Chinese commercial talents—the empire grew wealthy and strong. Following Khmer models, the king rose above his subjects atop a huge pyramid-shape administration. A fortified city was built, with temples that glittered as much as any in Sukhothai. This was the Kingdom of Siam that the first Europeans, the Portuguese, encountered in 1511.

Burmese invasion forces took Chiang Mai's Lanna Kingdom in 1558 and finally Ayutthaya in 1569. However, during the occupation, **Prince Naresuan,** descended from Sukhothai kings, in a historic battle scene atop an elephant, challenged the Burmese crown prince and defeated him with a single blow. Ayutthaya continued through the following 2 centuries in grand style, and while its Southeast Asian neighbors were falling under colonial rule, the court of Siam retained its own sovereignty. Thailand has the distinction of being the only Southeast Asian nation never to have been colonized, a point of great pride for Thais today. Unfortunately, the final demise of Ayutthaya was two more Burmese invasions in the 1760s.

The Siamese did not hesitate to build another kingdom. **Taksin,** a provincial governor, rose to power on the merits of his military excellence, charisma, and a firm belief that he was divinely appointed to rule. Rebuilding the capital at Thonburi, on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River (opposite present-day Bangkok), within 3 years he reunited the lands under the previous kingdom. But Taksin suffered from paranoia—he had monks killed, along with eventually his own wife and children. Regional powers were quick to get rid of him—he was swiftly kidnapped, covered in a velvet sack, and beaten to death with a sandalwood club.

These same regional powers turned to **Chaophraya Chakri** in 1782 to lead the country. Crowned **King Ramathibodi,** he was the first king of Thailand's present dynasty, the **Chakri Dynasty.** He moved the capital across the river to Bangkok, where he built the **Grand Palace** and great temples. The city grew around a network of canals, with the river as the central channel for trade and commerce. Rama I reinstated Theravada Buddhist doctrine, reestablished the state ceremonies of Ayutthaya, and revised all laws. He also wrote the ***Ramakien,*** based upon the Indian *Ramayana,* a legend that has become the subject for many Thai classical arts.

King Mongkut (1851–68) with his son, **King Chulalongkorn** (1868–1910), led Siam into the 20th century as an independent nation, establishing an effective civil service, formalizing global relations, and introducing industrialization-based economics. It was King Mongkut who hired Anna Leonowens (of *The King and I*) as an English tutor for his children. Thai people want everyone to know that Mongkut was not the overbearing, pushover fop described in her account. Historians side with the Thais, for she is barely mentioned in court accounts—the story had its origins more in her imagination than in realty.

During the reign of **King Prajadhipok,** Rama VII (1925–35), the growing urban middle class became increasingly discontent. Economic failings and bureaucratic bickering weakened the position of the monarchy, which was delivered its final blow by the Great Depression. In 1932, a group of midlevel officials staged a coup d'etat, and Prajadhipok abdicated in 1935.

Democracy had a shaky hold on Siam. Over the following decades, government leadership changed hands fast and frequently, many times the result of hostile takeover with the military at the helm. In 1939, the nation adopted the name Thailand—"Land of the Free."

During **World War II,** democracy was stalled in the face of the Japanese invasion in 1941. Thailand chose to side with the Japanese, but at the war's end, no punitive measures were taken against Thailand; the Thai ambassador in Washington had failed to deliver his country's declaration of war against the Allies.

Thailand managed to stay out of direct involvement in the **Vietnam War;** however, it continues to suffer repercussions from the burden of refugees. The U.S. pumped billions into the Thai economy, bringing riches to some and relative affluence to many, but further impoverishing the poor. Communism became an increasingly attractive political philosophy, and a full-scale insurrection seemed imminent. In June 1973, thousands of Thai students demonstrated in the streets, demanding a new constitution and the return to democratic principals. Tensions grew until October, when armed forces attacked a demonstration at Thammasat University in Bangkok, killing 69 students and wounding 800, paralyzing the capital with terror and revulsion.

The constitution was restored, a new government was elected, and democracy once again wobbled on. Many students, however, were not yet satisfied and continued to complain that the financial elite were still in control and still resisting change. In 1976, student protests again broke out, and there was a replay of the grisly scene of 3 years before at Thammasat University. The army seized control to impose and maintain order, conveniently spiriting away some bodies and prisoners, and another brief experiment with democracy was at an end. **Thanin Kraivichien** was installed as prime minister of a new right-wing government, which suspended freedom of speech and the press, further polarizing Thai society.

In 1980, **Prem Tinsulanonda** was named prime minister, and during the following 8 years, he managed to bring remarkable political and economic stability to Thailand. The Thai economy continued to grow steadily through the 1980s, fueled by Japanese investment and Chinese capital in flight from Hong Kong. Leadership since then has seen quite a few changes, including a military coup in 1991 and another student crackdown in 1992. It was under **Gen. Chavalit Yongjaiyudh**'s administration that the economic crisis hit Thailand in July 1997. While his government sat on its hands in indecision over how to proceed, connections between public officials and bad financial institutions became more apparent, and international investors lost confidence in Thailand. While in August 1997 Thailand accepted $17 billion in bailouts from the International Monetary Fund, political in-fighting stalled the government's action until November of the same year, when **Chuan Leekpai,** a previous prime minister, was elected into office again to try to straighten things out.

Economic stability was restored under the leadership of "the CEO Prime Minister" **Thaksin Shinawatra,** elected in 2000. From the outside, Thaksin's government appeared to be stable. Internally, however, discontent in the south and among the middle class in Bangkok was steadily growing over what was seen as the Thaksin regime's inherent corruption, subversion of democratic institutions, and inability to curb the increasing violence by Muslim separatists in the far south. This growing wave of discontent overtook the government in the form of an army-led coup on September 19, 2006, leaving the country under a military junta calling itself the **Council for National Security (CNS).** The CNS, headed by **Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratglin** (with Prime Minister Surayad Chulanont as the junta's public face), dissolved Parliament, suspended the constitution, and placed restrictions on political gatherings. In December 2007, the **People's Power Party (PPP),** formed largely of Thaksin supporters and led by **Samak Sundaravej,** won a narrow victory in the general election. Samak was removed from office by the Constitutional

Court in September 2008 and replaced by **Somchai Wongsawat,** a brother-in-law of Thaksin Shinawatra.

THAILAND TODAY

Today, under a pyramid of king, nation, and religion, Thais enjoy far more freedom than any of their neighbors. King Bhumibol Adulyadej holds a position outside of government, but is recognized as the defender of all Thai people. On a few occasions, he has put his foot down when government monkey business has not been beneficial to his people.

Recently the monkeys have been working overtime, however, and Thailand's political situation has been in flux since the September 2006 coup, with the **People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)** determined to bring down the PPP, which it sees as a proxy for Thaksin. For some months in late 2008, PAD supporters occupied Government House, and it seemed that the dissolution of parliament and new elections were likely. However, with hostilities between the PPP and PAD escalating, the future of Thailand's fragile democracy was insecure.

THAILAND'S PEOPLE & CULTURE

Thailand is a true melting pot of people and cultures. Thais descended from people of southern China, who for centuries absorbed Mon, Khmer, Lao, Persian, Indian, and Malay people and influences. The hill-tribe peoples of the north descended from Tibeto-Burman people who migrated from the Himalayas.

RELIGION Thai culture cannot be fully appreciated without some understanding of Buddhism, which is followed by 90% of the population. Although Buddhism first came to Thailand in the 3rd century b.c., when missionaries were sent from India, it was not until the 14th century that the *sangha* (monastic order) was established. Even Thai kings humbly don the monk's robes at age 13.

Other faiths in Thailand include Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Sunni Islam is followed by more than two million Thais, mostly in the south.

CUISINE Thai cuisine is the best of Chinese food ingredients and preparation combined with the sophistication of Indian spicing and topped off with red and green chilis. Basic ingredients include a cornucopia of shellfish, fresh fruits, and vegetables—asparagus, tamarind, bean sprouts, carrots, mushrooms of all kinds, various kinds of spinach, and bamboo shoots, combined with pungent spices such as basil, lemon grass, mint, chili, garlic, and coriander. Thai cooking employs coconut milk, curry paste, peanuts, and a variety of noodles and rice.

Among the dishes you'll find throughout the country are *tom yum goong,* a Thai hot-and-sour shrimp soup; *satay,* charcoal-broiled chicken, beef, or pork strips skewered on a bamboo stick and dipped in a peanut-coconut-curry sauce; spring rolls; *larb,* a spicy chicken or ground-beef concoction with mint and lime flavoring; salads, most with a dressing of onion, chili pepper, lime juice, and fish sauce; *pad thai* (Thai noodles), rice noodles usually served with shrimp, eggs, peanuts, fresh bean sprouts, lime, and a delicious sauce; *khao soi,* a northern curried soup served at small food stalls; a wide range of curries; spicy *tod man pla,* one of many fish dishes; sticky rice, served in the north and made from glutinous rice, prepared with vegetables and wrapped in a banana leaf; and Thai fried rice, a simple rice dish made with whatever the kitchen has on hand. "American fried rice" usually means fried rice topped with one egg, over easy, and meat. For

dessert, the local fruit, from pineapple to papaya, is delicious. Also try local favorites such as rambutan (similar to litchi), jackfruit, and pungent durian.

A word of caution: Thais enjoy incredibly spicy food, normally much more fiery than is tolerated in even the most piquant Western cuisines. Protect your own palate by saying "Mai phet, farang," meaning "Not spicy, foreigner."

ETIQUETTE

Disrespect for the royal family and religious figures, sites, and objects will cause great offense. While photography is generally permitted in temples, never stand above a Buddha image or point your feet in the direction of the Buddha. Women should never touch a monk; when handing a monk an offering, he will provide a cloth for you to lay the item upon, and he will collect it.

The traditional Thai greeting is called the *wai:* Place your palms together as in prayer, raise the tips of your fingers to your chin, and make a subtle bow from the waist while bending your knees slightly. It's also used to say thank you and goodbye. The person of lower social status initiates a *wai.* In general, you should not *wai* to children or to someone providing a service to you. Also, don't expect a monk to return a *wai;* they're exempt from the custom. In a business setting, a handshake is more appropriate. Note, too, that "Thai Time" dictates that appointments are loosely kept, and offense at someone's tardiness is met with confusion.

Address a Thai person by his or her first name preceded by "Khun." Don't be surprised if you are solely addressed by your first name—such as Mr. John or Ms. Mary. Close friends will use nicknames, which are much easier to remember.

See p. 29 for more etiquette tips.

LANGUAGE

Thai is derived from Mon, Khmer, Chinese, Pali, Sanskrit, and, increasingly, English. It is a tonal language, with distinctions based on inflection—low, mid-, high, rising, or falling tone—rather than stress, and it can elude most speakers of Western languages. Central Thai is the official language, but there are regional dialects.

One interesting aspect of the language that can be confusing to first-time visitors is that the polite words roughly corresponding to our *sir* and *ma'am* are determined not by the gender of the person addressed, but by the gender of the speaker; females say *ka* and males say *khap* (the formal pronunciation is *khrap,* but the *r* is rarely heard in everyday usage). Unfortunately, there is no universal transliteration system, so you will see the usual **Thai greeting** written in Roman letters as *sawatdee, sawaddi, sawasdee, sawusdi,* and so forth.

Useful Thai Phrases

Note: **All phrases end in *khap* for men and *ka* for women.**

Hello	**Sa-wa-dee-khap (male); sa-wa-dee-ka (female)**
Thank you	**Kahp-koon-khap/ka**
How are you?	**Sa-bai-dee-mai-khap/ka**
I am fine	**Sa-bai-dee-khap/ka**
Excuse me	**Kor-toht-khap/ka**
I understand	**Kao-jai-khap/ka**
I don't understand	**Mai-kao-jai-khap/ka**
Do you speak English?	**Khun-poot-pa-sa-angrit-dai-mai-khap/ka?**
Where is the toilet?	**Hawng-nam-yoo-tee-nai-khap/ka?**

Do you have . . . ?	**Mee . . . mai-khap/ka?**
drinking water	**nam-deum**
coffee/tea with milk/sugar	**cafe/cha sai/nohm/nam-than**
How much?	**Tao-rai?**
That's expensive/ very expensive	**Paeng/paeng maak**
Can I get a discount?	**Loht-dai-mai-khap/ka?**
Bus station	**Satani-rot-meh**
Train station	**Satani-rot-fai**
Stop here	**Yoot-tee-nee-khap/ka**
Not spicy, please	**Mai-pet-khap/ka**

2 THE BEST OF THAILAND IN 2 WEEKS

Thailand is known worldwide for its Buddhist temples and beautiful beaches. Fortunately for visitors, the recent growth of no-frills airlines providing service throughout the country means that all the top spots are no more than an inexpensive hour-long flight from Bangkok. The following 2-week plan starts you off in Bangkok (temples) and then takes you south to Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, and Krabi (beaches). The last stop is Chiang Mai in the north (more temples), before returning to Bangkok or heading to your next destination.

Days ❶–❸: Bangkok ★★★

Not to be missed, the capital is Thailand's most happening and vibrant city. It is also extremely congested, so you'll want to stay at a hotel with easy access to the BTS skytrain. On your first day, take the skytrain to Saphan Taksin pier on the Chao Phraya River and hop a tourist boat heading north. Stop off at **Wat Po** to see the giant **Reclining Buddha,** followed by the **Grand Palace** and **Wat Phra Kaeo,** which houses the **Emerald Buddha.** On your second day, start shopping. If it's the weekend, head to **Chatuchak Market,** a full day in itself. If it's a weekday, then **Sukhumvit Road** beckons—hit the malls during the day before strolling through infamous **Patpong** and its **Night Market.** On your third day, take a cruise upriver to the old capital of **Ayutthaya,** home to an array of temples in varying states of decay.

Days ❹–❺: Phuket ★★★

Fly directly to Phuket, one of Thailand's most beautiful islands. Relax by getting a massage or enjoying the beach (or both) during the day; then head to **Patong** for some adventurous nightlife. If you're up for it after a night on the town, a little daylight adventure can be had by kayaking in **Phang Nga Bay.**

Days ❻–❼: Ko Phi Phi ★★★

Hop a morning ferry to Phi Phi, and you'll be settled in at your resort by lunch. **Snorkeling** and **scuba diving** are the activities du jour. Leonardo DiCaprio fans should choose a day tour that stops at the locale where *The Beach* was filmed.

Days ❽–❾: Railay Beach ★★

A longtail boat from your resort drops you off at a ferry for the short hop back to the mainland and Railay Beach in Krabi Province. Spend the afternoon at one of the beach's **climbing schools,** battling gravity on sheer karst peaks. The next day, give your body a rest on the white sands of **Phra Nang Beach.** Wade out to **Happy Island** at low tide.

Day ⑩: Transit to Chiang Mai

There are no direct flights from Krabi to Chiang Mai, which means you'll have a stopover in Bangkok, a full day of travel, and a necessary break from the sun.

Days ⑪–⑬: Chiang Mai ★★★

Rent a bicycle or hire a tuk-tuk, and visit some of Chiang Mai's 300 temples. Don't miss **Wat Chedi Luang** and **Wat Phra Singh.** In the evening, browse the locally made handicrafts at the famous **Night Bazaar.** The next morning, hire a *songtao* for the drive to the top of **Doi Suthep** mountain and get blessed by a monk at **Wat Phra That.** If you've fallen in love with Thai food, take a half-day **cooking class;** if you're not shopped out, hop on a white *songtao* to **Sankamphaeng Road,** a retail paradise. To cap off your northern adventure (especially if you have an extra day or two), take a **jungle trek** and visit the local hill tribes.

Day ⑭: Bangkok or Beyond

Fly back to Bangkok to tie up any loose ends—for instance, sometimes it's easier to mail your souvenirs home than lugging them on the plane—or head to the next port of call on your Southeast Asian adventure.

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO THAILAND

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)** publishes pamphlets and maps as well as current schedules for festivals and holidays. Visit its useful website at **www.tourismthailand.org**. Once in the country, you'll also find many free tourist maps and resources.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

All visitors to Thailand must carry a valid passport with proof of onward passage (either a return or through ticket). Visa applications are not required if you are staying up to 30 days and are a national of one of 41 designated countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the U.K., and the U.S. New Zealanders may stay up to 3 months. The **Immigration Division of the Royal Thai Police Department** is at 507 Soi Suan Phlu (off Sathorn Tai Rd., south of Silom area and Sala Daeng BTS station; ✆ **02287-3101-10;** www.immigration.go.th). A visa extension costs a whopping 1,900B ($54/£35). It is best to always have a proper visa and exit the country by the date stamped in your passport (or make the proverbial "visa run" over border points with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, or Malaysia). Visitors who overstay their visa will be fined 500B ($14/£9) for each extra day, payable in cash upon exiting the country. For exhaustive visa particulars, try the unofficial but informative site www.thaivisa.com.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

Tourists are allowed to enter the country with 1 liter of alcohol and 200 cigarettes (or 250g of cigars or smoking tobacco) per adult, duty free. There are no restrictions on the import of foreign currencies or traveler's checks, but travelers need an export license for any antiques or art objects that they intend to take out of the country.

MONEY

The Thai unit of currency, the **baht,** is written on price tags and elsewhere as the letter B crossed with a vertical slash (written "B" in this chapter, as in "100B"). One baht is

divided into 100 satang, though you'll rarely see a satang coin. Yellow coins represent 25 and 50 satang; silver coins come in 1, 2, 5, and 10B. Bank notes come in denominations of 20 (green), 50 (blue), 100 (red), 500 (purple), and 1,000 (khaki). This edition uses the rate of **35 baht = $1 or £55.**

ATMS Most major banks throughout the country now have ATMs, which are also increasingly common in major tourist spots.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE The largest banks in Thailand—try **Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmers Bank, Siam Commercial Bank,** or **Bank of Ayudhya**—all perform debit and cash advance services through the MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/PLUS networks. ***Note:*** Time changes between here and home can affect your ability to withdraw cash on 2 consecutive business days.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Traveler's checks can be cashed in most banks or big hotels.

CREDIT CARDS Nearly all international hotels and larger businesses accept credit cards, though it's cash only in rural parts. Despite protests from credit card companies, many establishments add a 3% to 5% surcharge for payment. Use discretion in using your card—all major credit card companies list Thailand as a high-risk area for fraud. Don't let your card out of your sight, even for a moment, and be sure to keep all receipts. To report a lost or stolen credit card, call the emergency service numbers listed under "Lost & Found" in "Fast Facts: Thailand" (p. 69).

WHEN TO GO

CLIMATE Thailand has two distinct climate zones: tropical in the south and tropical savanna in the north. The northern and central areas of the country (including Bangkok) experience three distinct seasons. The hot season lasts from March to May, with temperatures averaging in the upper 90s Fahrenheit (mid-30s Celsius); April is the hottest month. This period sees very little rain, if any at all. The rainy season begins in June and lasts until October; the average temperature is 84°F (29°C), with 90% humidity. While the rainy season brings frequent showers, it's rare for them to last for a whole day or for days on end. Daily showers come in torrents, usually in the late afternoon or evening. The cool season, from November through February, has temperatures from the high 70s to low 80s Fahrenheit (mid- to upper 20s Celsius), with moderate and infrequent rain showers. In the north during the cool season (which is also the peak season for tourism), day temperatures can be as low as 60°F (16°C) in Chiang Mai and 41°F (5°C) in the hills.

The southern Malay Peninsula has intermittent showers year-round and daily ones during the rainy season (temperatures average in the low 80sF/high 20sC). If you're traveling to Phuket or Ko Samui, it will be helpful to note that the two islands alternate peak seasons. Optimal weather on Phuket occurs between November and April, when the island welcomes the highest numbers of travelers. Alternately, Ko Samui's good weather lasts from about February to October.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS Many holidays are based on the Thai lunar calendar, with numerous regional Buddhist fetes. The national holidays are **New Year's Day,** on January 1; **Makha Puja,** which falls in February; **Chakri Day,** on April 6; **Songkran,** the **Thai New Year,** celebrated from April 13 to April 15; **Coronation Day,** on May 5; **Visakha Puja,** which falls in May; **Asalha Puja,** which falls in July; **Her Majesty the Queen's Birthday,** on August 12; **Chulalongkorn Day,** on October 23; **His Majesty the King's Birthday,** on December 5; **Constitution Day,** on December 10; and **New Year's Eve,** on December 31.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for information on the major health issues that affect travelers to Southeast Asia.

Don't drink the tap water in Thailand, even in the major hotels. Most hotels provide bottled water in or near the minibar or in the bathroom; use it for brushing your teeth as well as for drinking. Most restaurants serve bottled or boiled water and ice made from boiled water, but always ask to be sure. You may also want to exercise caution when eating from roadside and market stalls or in smaller local restaurants.

Air quality is not good in Bangkok, which has no emissions standards. Buses, trucks, and cars belch some toxic stuff, so visitors with respiratory concerns or sensitivity should take caution and consider donning a face mask.

Thailand suffered fallout from the regionwide **SARS** scare in the winter and spring of 2003, but there have been no reported cases in the region since 2004. A number of cases of **avian influenza,** also called the **bird flu,** have been reported in Thailand, but the disease has been mostly isolated to people working in the poultry industry. Note that you cannot contract bird flu from consuming cooked chicken.

SAFETY CONCERNS Visitors to Thailand should refer to their home country's overseas travel bureau or with the **U.S. State Department** (click "Travel Warnings" at **www.travel.state.gov**) to learn more about the present situation in the area. The far south of Thailand has seen attacks by Muslim extremists on the Buddhist population, police, and military. Attacks blamed on Muslim groups have moved north from the immediate border areas of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala provinces to Hat Yai in Songkhla Province, a major transit point in the south. Although these attacks were isolated incidents, they did target tourist areas; at least two foreign nationals were killed. Travel to the far south is generally discouraged.

The general political situation in Thailand, both in Bangkok and provincial capitals, is still very volatile, with members of the People's Power Party (PPP) and People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) looking to escalate conflict. Thus tourists should always be aware of their surroundings (especially in crowded areas), avoid political gatherings of any size, and keep abreast of the current political situation before and during their trip. In addition to the U.S. State Department website (see above), local newspaper websites include **www.bangkokpost.com** and **www.nationmultimedia.com**.

Anonymous violent crime in Thailand is rare; however, petty crimes such as purse snatching and pickpocketing are common. Overland travelers should take care on overnight buses and trains, popular targets for small-time thieves.

Road conditions vary throughout the country, but Bangkok is busy and chaotic. Crossing the streets can be the greatest risk on your trip; move slowly and exercise caution. In the beach towns, motorbike accidents are all too common—always wear a helmet if you decide to rent a vehicle.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE In September 2006, the ultramodern **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (say Su-va-na-*poom*) opened and now handles all international flights and many domestic flights into and out of Bangkok. However, due to "teething problems" at Suvarnabhumi, the old airport of **Don Muang** remains in service for non-connecting domestic flights. **Thai Airways** (✆ **800/426-5204** in the U.S.; head office at 89 Vibhavadi Rangsit Rd., Bangkok, ✆ **02545-3690-92;** www.thaiair.com) covers virtually all Southeast

Asian nations on its routes. If you leave Thailand by air, you're required to pay a 700B ($20/£13) international departure tax, though this is now included in ticket prices.

Note that while most international flights arrive in Bangkok, you can also fly direct to Phuket, Ko Samui, Hat Yai, and Chiang Mai from regional destinations such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos, and Phnom Penh and Siem Reap in Cambodia.

BY TRAIN Thailand is accessible via train from Singapore and peninsular Malaysia. Malaysia's **Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM)** rail service begins in Singapore (✆ **65/222-5165**), stopping in Kuala Lumpur (✆ **603/273-8000**) and Butterworth (Penang; ✆ **604/323-7962**), before heading for Thailand, where it joins service with the State Railway of Thailand. Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** is centrally located on Krung Kassem Road (✆ **02220-4334**).

The ***Eastern & Oriental Express*** (✆ **800/524-2420** in the U.S., or 65/395-0678 in Singapore; www.orient-express.com) operates a 2-night/3-day journey between Singapore and Bangkok that makes getting there almost better than being there. The romance of 1930s colonial travel is joined with modern luxury on this luxurious train. Departures are limited; current fares start at $2,210 (£1,470) per person one-way during high season. There are also onward connections to Chiang Mai with a stop in Ayutthaya.

BY BUS From every major city in peninsular Malaysia (and even Singapore), you can pick up a bus to Thailand. VIP buses cost more but have reclining seats and more legroom; traveling overland along the length of the southern peninsula is best by train, however. Buses connect with Laos over the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge to Vientiane and at other southern border crossings, and with Cambodia via Poipet.

GETTING AROUND

Transportation within Thailand is accessible, efficient, and inexpensive. If your time is short, fly. But if you have the time to take in the countryside and you care to see a bit of provincial living, travel by bus, train, or private car.

BY PLANE Most convenient are domestic flights on **Thai Airways** (6 Larn Luang Rd., Bangkok; ✆ **02356-1111**), which connects Bangkok and 27 domestic cities, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Phitsanulok, Loei, Surat Thani, and Phuket. **Bangkok Airways** (99 Moo 14 Vibhavadirangsit Rd., Chatuchak; ✆ **02265-5678;** www.bangkokair.com) connects Bangkok with Ko Samui, Phuket, Krabi, U Tapao (near Pattaya), Sukhothai, and Chiang Mai, and has international flights from 15 Asian destinations. Budget airline **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999** in Bangkok; www.airasia.com) flies between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phuket, Krabi, Hat Yai, and several other destinations for super-cheap (book ahead).

BY TRAIN Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **02220-4334,** or 1690 for information hot line; www.railway.co.th), now easily reached by subway, is a convenient, user-friendly facility. Clear signs point the way to public toilets, pay phones, and a food court. A post office, information counter, police box, ATMs and money-changing facilities, convenience shops, baggage check, and restaurants surround a large open area.

From this hub, the State Railway of Thailand provides regular service to destinations north as far as Chiang Mai, northeast to Udon Thani, east to Pattaya, and south to Thailand's southern border with continuing service to Malaysia. Complete schedules and fare information can be obtained at their website or by calling Hua Lampong Railway Station directly at the numbers listed above.

The various fare classes of trains are based on speed and comfort. The fastest is the Special Express, which is the best choice for long-haul, overnight travel. These trains cut travel time by as much as 60% and have sleeper cars, which are a must for the really long trips. Rapid trains are the next best option. Prices vary by class, from air-conditioned sleeper cars in first class down to the straight-backed, hard seats in third class.

BY BUS Thailand has a very efficient and inexpensive bus system, highly recommended for budget travelers and short-haul trips. Options abound, but the major choices are government or private, air-conditioned or non-air-conditioned. Most travelers use the private, air-conditioned buses. Buses are best for short excursions; long-haul buses are an excellent value, but they can be slow and uncomfortable.

Bangkok has three major bus stations, each serving a different part of the country. All air-conditioned public buses to the west and the southern peninsula arrive and depart from the **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02894-6122**), which recently moved to Phutthamonthon Soi 1 in North Thonburi, west of the river over the Phra Pinklao Bridge from the Democracy Monument. Service to the east coast (including Pattaya) arrives and departs from the **Eastern Bus Terminal,** also known as **Ekamai** (✆ **02391-2504**), on Sukhumvit Road opposite Soi 63 (Ekamai BTS skytrain station). Buses to the north arrive and leave from the **Northern Bus Terminal,** aka **Mo Chit** (✆ **02936-2852**), Kampaengphet 2 Road, Mo Chit, near the Chatuchak Weekend Market, and a short taxi or bus ride from the Mo Chit skytrain station. VIP buses leave from locations in town.

BY CAR Renting a car is a snap in Thailand, although self-driving in Bangkok traffic needs nerves of steel. Outside the city, it's a good option, though Thai drivers are quite reckless and American drivers must reorient themselves to driving on the left. Among the many car-rental agencies, both **Avis** (✆ **02251-1131;** www.avisthailand.com) and **Budget** (✆ **02203-9222;** www.budget.co.th) have convenient offices around the country.

You can rent a car with or without a driver. All drivers are required to have an international driver's license. Self-drive rates start at around 1,000B ($29/£18) per day for a small Honda sedan.

Local tour operators in larger destinations such as Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Ko Samui will rent cars for considerably cheaper than the larger, more well-known agencies. Sometimes the savings are up to 50%. These companies rarely require international driver's licenses. Always ask if you will still be covered by their insurance policy.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Thailand accommodations run the gamut, but you can expect a high standard of comfort and service at affordable rates. In places such as Phuket and Ko Samui, rainy season brings discounts of 30% and 50%. You can negotiate with hotel reservations agents—there are always special discounts, packages, or free add-ons for extra value, and it never hurts to ask.

TIPS ON DINING

Larger Thai cities and towns play host to many Western restaurants, but go for authentic Thai wherever possible. One-dish meals such as noodle soup, fried rice, or noodles are popular for solo travelers, but Thai meals are best when shared family style. There are many regional variations, but the most notable are the barbecue, sticky rice, and spicy papaya salads in Isan (the northeast) and the fiery coconut curries of the south; always ask about regional specials. Most family meals consist of a meat or fish dish (often a whole fish), fried or steamed vegetables, a curry, stir-fried dishes of meat and vegetables,

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Thailand:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Thailand's country code **(66),** and then the phone number (for example, a Bangkok number would be 011 66 2000-0000). ***Important note:*** When making international calls to Thailand, be sure to omit the **0** that appears before all phone numbers in this guide (thus you will only dial eight digits after the 66 country code).
- **To call a cellphone number in Thailand:** All Thai cellphone numbers are now 10 digits, beginning with 08, but don't forget to drop the 0 when calling from abroad (for example, 011 66 80000-0000).
- **To place a direct international call from Thailand:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Laos, 856; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

and a soup, such as fiery *tom yum.* Meals are lengthy and boisterous affairs, and food is picked at slowly (often accompanied by local beer, rice wine, or strong whiskey). Table manners are casual and practical.

Be cautious with street eats: Check out the stall to see that it's clean and the ingredients are fresh. Most places temper spices for foreigners, but always ask.

You're not expected to tip at a Thai restaurant, but rounding up the bill or leaving 20B (55¢/35p) on top of most checks is acceptable.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

Shopping is a full contact sport in Thailand. In markets and smaller shops, bargaining is the name of the game. If your suggested price is accepted, it is rude to walk away without finishing the sale. Keep in mind that in high-traffic tourist areas, prices are always inflated. In shopping malls and boutiques, prices are fixed. Some shops charge a 3% charge on credit card purchases.

Fast Facts Thailand

American Express There is no specific agent that handles American Express services in Thailand anymore, but there is an **American Express** office at 388 Pahonyothin Rd., in Bangkok. You can reach the office at ✆ **02273-5500** during business hours (Mon–Fri 8:30am–5pm) or call the customer service hot line (✆ **02273-5544**) with any problems or questions.

Business Hours Government offic es (including branch post offic es) ar e open Monday thr ough F riday fr om 8:30am t o 4:30pm, with a lunch br eak bet ween noon and 1pm. Businesses ar e generally open fr om 8am t o 5pm. Shops of ten stay open fr om 8am until 7pm or lat er, 7 da ys a w eek. Depar tment st ores ar e generally open fr om 10am t o 9pm.

Drugstores Pharmacies carry brand-name medications; pharmacists of ten speak some English and ar e v ery helpful.

Electricity All outlets ar e 220 v olts A C (50 c ycles), with t wo flat- or r ound-pronged holes. I f y ou use a 110-v olt hair dr yer, elec tric sha ver, or batt ery char ger, bring a transformer and adapt er. If y ou're bring ing a lapt op, don't f orget a sur ge pr otector.

Embassies & C onsulates Most c ountries ha ve embassies in Bangkok ; the U .S., Australia, C anada, and the U .K. also ha ve c onsulates in Chiang M ai. M ost embassies ha ve 24-hour emer gency ser vices f or their citiz ens. S ee "Fast F acts" in the Bangkok and Chiang M ai sec tions f or c ontact inf ormation.

Emergencies C all ✆ **1699** or 1155 for the tourist police. Don't expect many English speakers at normal polic e posts outside the major t ourist ar eas. I t is a good idea to c ontact y our embassy in case of emer gencies, both medical and legal .

Internet A ccess You'll find I nternet caf es ev erywhere in Thailand. S ee the "Fast Facts" sec tions in specific destination sec tions f or details.

Language Central (of ten called Bangkok) Thai is the official language . English is spoken in the major cities at most hot els, r estaurants, and shops , and is the second language of the pr ofessional class. S ee "Language," p. 62, f or mor e inf ormation.

Liquor Laws The official drink ing age in Thailand is 18, but la ws ar e loosely f ollowed—you can buy alc ohol in most ar eas any time of da y or night, with ex ceptions f or c ertain Buddhist holida ys and elec tion da ys. All r estaurants, bars , and nightclubs sell booze, and you can pick up takeout-siz e packages from just about anywhere. N ightspots close bet ween midnight and 2am.

Lost & Found Your home embassy in Thailand is the place to contact if you've lost your tra vel documents and need them r eplaced. F or mor e inf ormation, see "Embassies & Consulates," above.

If y ou ha ve lost an ything or had y our valuables st olen, call the national polic e hot line at ✆ **1155.** Believe it or not, ther e have been several reports of lost items being returned to the appropriate consulate by taxi drivers and bus attendants.

To r eport a lost or st olen cr edit car d in Thailand, call **American Expr ess** (✆ **02273-5544**), **Diners Club** (✆ **02238-3660**), **MasterCard** (✆ **001-800-11887-0663**), or **Visa** (✆ **001-800-441-4358**).

If y ou need emer gency cash o ver the w eekend, when all banks and American Express offices ar e closed, you can ha ve money wir ed to y ou via **Western Union** (✆ **02/254-7000** in Bangkok), which has branches in Bangkok and in man y provincial capitals. ***A special warning:*** Western Union's exchange rate is not favorable, so use this ser vice only in an emer gency.

Mail Airmail postcards to the U.S. cost 12B to 15B (35¢–40¢/20p–25p), depending on the size of the car d; first-class letters cost 19B (55¢/35p) per 10 g rams. Rates to Europe are about the same. Airmail delivery usually takes 7 days.

Air parcel post to the U.S. costs 950B ($27/£17) per kilogram. Surface or sea parcel post costs 550B ($16/£10) for 1 kilogram (and takes 3–4 months for delivery). International Express Mail (EMS) costs 598B ($17/£11) for up to 250 grams and 740B ($21/£13) for up to 500 grams, with delivery guaranteed in 3 to 6 days. See individual destination sections for local post offices and their hours.

Shipping by air freight is expensive. Major international delivery services have their main dispatching offices in Bangkok, though they deliver throughout the country; these include **DHL Thailand,** Sathorn Road (✆ **02345-5000**); **FedEx,** Rama IV Road (✆ **1782** hot line); and **UPS Parcel Delivery Service,** 16/1 Soi 44/1 Sukhumvit Rd. (✆ **02728-9000**). Many businesses will also pack and mail merchandise for you at a reasonable price.

Newspapers & Magazines The major domestic English-language dailies are the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation,* distributed in the morning in the capital and later in the day around the country. They cover the domestic political scene, as well as international news from AP, UPI, and Reuters wire services.

Police In an emergency, call the tourist police at ✆ **1699** or 1155 to connect with English speakers 24 hours a day.

Safety Petty crimes, such as purse snatching or pick pocketing, are common in Thailand. Overland travelers should take care on overnight buses and trains, popular targets for small-time thieves. Beware of inviting strangers to your hotel room—there are many incidents of drugging and robbery (especially by prostitutes).

Watch out for credit card scams: Carry a minimum of cards, don't allow them out of your sight, and keep all receipts. Don't carry unnecessary valuables, and keep those you do have in your hotel safe.

A special warning: Be wary of strangers who offer to guide you (particularly in Bangkok), take you to any shop (especially jewelry shops), or buy you food or drink. This most frequently occurs near tourist attractions. Without exception, this is a scam of some kind. These folks invariably want to sell you fake gems or waste your time and earn a commission. Just walk away.

See "Health & Safety," p. 66, for more tips on keeping yourself safe.

Taxes Hotels charge a 7% government value-added tax (VAT) and typically add a 10% service charge; hotel restaurants add 8.25% government tax. Smaller hotels quote the price inclusive of these charges.

Telephones The international country code for Thailand is **66.** Major hotels in Thailand offer international direct dialing (IDD), long-distance service, and in-house fax transmission. However, hotels levy a surcharge on local and long-distance calls, which can add up to 50% in some cases. Credit card or collect calls are a much better value, but most hotels add a hefty service charge for these, too.

Major post offices have special offices or booths for overseas calls, as well as fax and telex service, usually open from 7am to 11pm. Guesthouses and travel agents in tourist areas offer long-distance calling or call-back service on their private line or use very affordable Net-to-phone connections of varying quality. Local calls can be made from any red or blue public pay phone. Card phones are your best bet; buy a Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT) card, for use in yellow phones, anywhere.

For directory assistance, dial ✆ **1133.** See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 69, for details on how to make calls to and from Thailand.

Time Zone Thailand is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time. During winter months, Bangkok is 7 hours ahead of London, 12 hours ahead of New York, and 15 hours ahead of Los Angeles.

Tipping If no service charge is added to your check in a fine-dining establishment, a 10% tip is appropriate. Airport or hotel porters expect tips, but 20B to 50B (55¢–$1.40/35p–90p) is acceptable. Feel free to reward good service wherever you find it. Tipping taxi drivers is not expected, but accepted. Carry small bills, as many drivers either don't have change or won't admit having any.

Toilets The better restaurants and hotels will have Western toilets. Food shops and a few budget hotels will have an Asian-style squat toilet—a hole in the floor with foot pads on either side. Near the toilet is a water bucket or sink with a small ladle. The water is for cleaning yourself and flushing the toilet. Don't count on these places having toilet paper. Shopping malls and department stores invariably have Western-style restrooms.

Water It is safer not to drink tap water, even in the major hotels. Most hotels provide bottled water in or near the minibar or in the bathroom; use it for brushing your teeth as well as for drinking. Most restaurants serve bottled or boiled water and ice made from boiled water, but always ask to be sure.

4 BANGKOK ★★★

With an estimated population of eight million in a country of only 65 million, Thailand's capital is the urban and cultural heart of the land. Choked with traffic, polluted and corrupt, the city is also the financial capital of one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Central Bangkok is all columns of glass and steel, hulking shopping complexes, and hotels linked at the city center by an elevated monorail, the BTS skytrain, and a slick new subway.

Bangkok was founded when King Rama I moved the city across the river from Thonburi in 1782. Today, the capital's stunning temples share space with skyscrapers and Starbucks; luxury condominiums stand stridently just a stone's throw from labyrinthine slums along dirty canals; and glittering shopping malls cast their shadows over dusty open-air street bazaars. The city is less "Asian" than what many visitors often expect, but there are still gems to find in and among the new construction and suburban sprawl, and exploring Bangkok is certainly a highlight.

GETTING THERE

Bangkok has a massive airport, three bus terminals, and a centrally located train station. Affordable taxis and tuk-tuks (three-wheeled, motorized trishaws) cruise the broad avenues. The BTS skytrain—the city's elevated rail line—and the new Bangkok subway have led to improved connections throughout the city, for example between the domestic train station and the northern bus terminal.

BY PLANE Bangkok is a major hub for air travel in Southeast Asia, with around 100 airlines providing service. The ultramodern **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (say Su-va-na-*poom;* www.bangkokairportonline.com; airport code BKK), with one of the largest terminal buildings in the world, is a city unto itself, and is located about 30km (19 miles) east of Bangkok.

Passengers will find the following services available upon arrival: luggage storage for 100B ($2.85/£1.80) per day; currency-exchange banks with the same rates as those in town; ATMs; phone-rental booths; **Airport Information** (✆ **02132-9328**) and **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)** booths; Association of Thai Travel Agents desks; Thai Hotel Association desks; Thai and international restaurants; massage services; convenience stores; and the **Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel** (✆ **02131-1111**).

When complete (expected Aug 2009), the **express rail link** will be the fastest way from the airport into town, promising to take just 15 minutes to the City Air Terminal in Makkasan District and providing an interchange with the subway at Petchaburi station.

Metered taxi stands are on Level 2 of the terminal building, and there is a 50B ($1.40/90p) surcharge for airport service. The fare to most downtown destinations is around 250B to 300B ($7.15–$8.55/£7.15–£5.45), and the journey takes anywhere between 45 and 90 minutes.

Private limousine services have air-conditioned sedans for hire from booths in the arrivals hall. Trips to town start at 900B ($26/£16), but it is really only worth taking this costly option if there is an enormous queue for metered taxis.

The **Airport Express** is a convenient and inexpensive alternative, with regular departures from 5am to midnight. The four routes available are from Suvarnabhumi to Silom Road; to Khao San Road; to Sukhumvit Road; and to HualamphongRailway Station (via Siam Center). Stops include many major hotels. Tickets cost just 150B ($4.30/£2.70).

The **transport center,** a 3km (1 3/4-mile) shuttle ride from the airport terminal, handles all city bus service to and from Bangkok, buses to outlying provinces, and all car-rental companies. Take a free airport shuttle from outside of the arrivals hall (Level 2).

City buses leave regularly and have clearly marked routes (the no. 552 bus is the most convenient for downtown Bangkok, stopping at the On Nut BTS station). **Interprovincial buses** with service to Pattaya (130B/$3.70/£2.35), Trat/Ko Chang (362B/$10/£6.60), and Nong Khai/Vientiane, Laos (510B/$15/£9.25) leave less frequently throughout the day.

Car-rental companies at Suvarnabhumi include **Avis** (✆ **084/700-8157-9**), **National** (✆ **081/358-9440**), **Budget** (✆ **02/134-4006-7**), and **Hertz** (✆ **086/779-5456**). Daily rentals start at around 1,000B ($29/£18) for a Toyota Soluna. Pickup and drop-off is at the transport center.

At the time of writing, the old airport at **Don Muang** (www.donmuangairportonline.com; airport code DMK), located 24km (15 miles) north of the city center, was still being used for some domestic flights, so check your travel documents carefully to be sure which airport you are leaving from. Being less crowded than before, it is relatively easy to get into the city center by **express bus** (AB1 to Silom; AB2 to Khao San; AB3 to Sukhumvit and AB4 to Hualamphong; all routes 100B/$2.85/£1.80) or **metered taxi** (stand in front of terminal; 50B/$1.40/90p surcharge; fare downtown around 200B–250B/$5.70–$7.15/£3.60–£4.55).

BY TRAIN The Thai rail network is extremely well organized, connecting Bangkok with major cities throughout the country. (You can also travel by train to Bangkok from Singapore, via Kuala Lumpur and Butterworth, Malaysia.)

All trains to and from the capital stop at **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334), east of Chinatown at the intersection of Rama IV and Krung Kasem roads. The station has many services, including baggage check and a small food court. The information counter is helpful. From the station, connect to your destination by subway, metered taxi, or tuk-tuk. Be on the alert for scammers around the station.

BY BUS Bangkok has three major bus stations, each serving a different part of the country. Buses to the west and the southern peninsula arrive and depart from the **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02894-6122**), on Putthamonthon Soi 1, west of the river over the Phra Pinklao Bridge from the Democracy Monument. Service to the east coast arrives and departs from the **Eastern Bus Terminal,** also known as **Ekamai** (✆ **02391-2504**), on Sukhumvit Road opposite Soi 63 (Ekamai BTS skytrain station). Buses to the north arrive and leave from the **Northern Bus Terminal,** aka **Mo Chit** (✆ **02936-2852**), Kampaengphet 2 Road, Mo Chit, near the Chatuchak Weekend Market (easily reached by the BTS skytrain or the MRT subway).

CITY LAYOUT

Vintage 19th-century photographs of Bangkok show the Chao Phraya River bustling with humble longtail boats and elaborate royal barges. Built along the banks of the broad, winding river, the city spread inland through a network of *klongs* (canals) that rivaled the intricacy—though never the elegance—of Venice.

The **Historic District,** along the Chao Phraya River, contains most of the city's historical sights, such as the Grand Palace, and most of the city's original *wats* (temples with resident monks). Following the river south, you'll run into the narrow lanes of Bangkok's **Chinatown** and, farther down, a row of the city's finest riverside hotels, including the Oriental and the Peninsula. Inland from the river, Bangkok's central **business district** is situated on Sathorn, Silom, and Surawongse roads, beginning at Charoen Krung (or "New") Road. Bangkok's main shopping thoroughfare, on **Rama I Road,** between Payathai and Ratchadamri roads, sports huge modern shopping complexes such as CentralWorld and Siam Paragon. East of Rama I, **Sukhumvit Road** has acres of expat condos, restaurants, shopping, and nightlife.

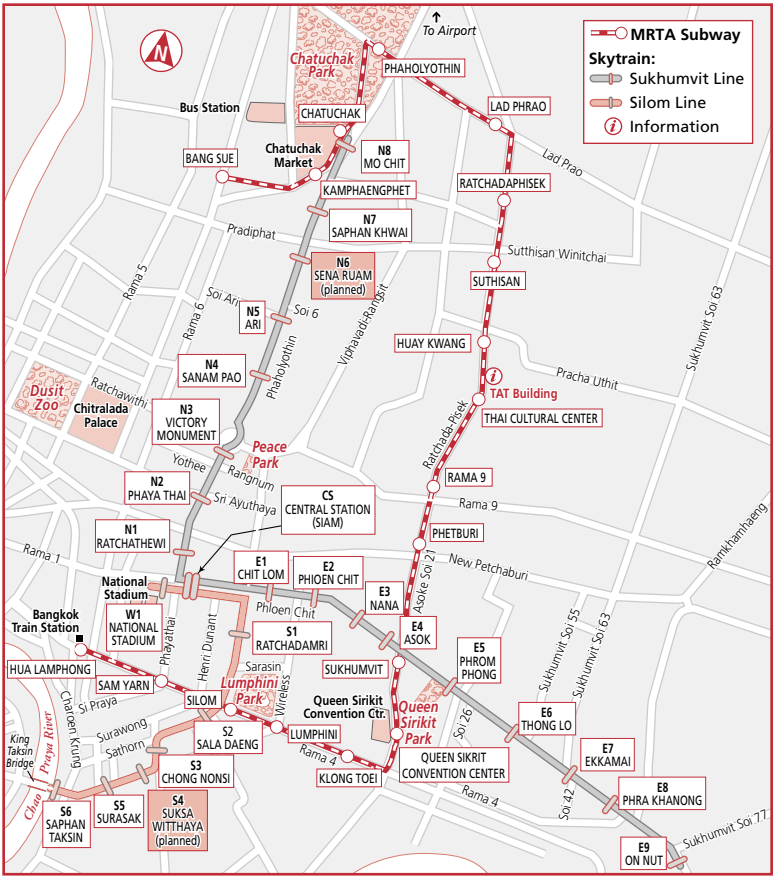
Get to know the Thai word *soi,* meaning "lane." Larger thoroughfares in the city have names, and *sois* are the many numbered side streets along their length, odd and even numbers on alternate sides. For example, Sukhumvit Soi 5 is the home of the Amari Boulevard Hotel, while Sukhumvit Soi 8, a few minutes' walk east and across the street, is where you'll find Le Banyan restaurant. Note that closely numbered *sois* are not necessarily near each other.

STREET MAPS Nancy Chandler's *Map of Bangkok* (250B/$7.15/£4.55) is a detailed, colorful source for finding specific hotels, restaurants, and shopping. The free *Thaiways Map of Bangkok* and *Metropolitan Map* (available in most hotels) are both chock-full of adverts and detailed city maps with specific insets. Bus maps are plentiful and helpful if you go that route.

GETTING AROUND

It can take more than 2 hours by taxi to get from one side of town to the other during rush hour, so it's best to avail yourself of the many new options below. Taxis are affordable, but at the wrong time of day (difficult to predict) can be a real nightmare.

BY SKYTRAIN The **Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS skytrain)** is an elevated railway system high above the maddening traffic. Trains access Bangkok's central areas



and now connect with the **MRTA subway.** Single-journey tickets cost from 15B to 40B (40¢–$1.15/25p–70p). Buy ticket cards at platform vending machines: Choose your numbered destination from a map, press the corresponding button on the map, and pay in a slot (get small change at the info counter as needed). Ticket cards let you through the turnstile and are required for exit, so be sure to hang on to them during the ride. Also available are 1- and 3-day passes and stored-value cards. The skytrain operates daily between 6am and midnight.

BY SUBWAY Bangkok's new subway line makes a reverse "C" though town, conveniently linking Hua Lampong Railway Station with the Chatuchak Weekend Market and bus-terminal area, with connections to the BTS skytrain at Silom Road and on Sukhumvit at Asok. Hours of operation are 6am to midnight. Subway tokens cost between 15B and 39B (40¢–$1.10/25p–60p), depending on distance traveled. Tap the token on the turnstile screen to enter, and put the token in the turnstile slot when exiting at your destination.

BY RIVERBOAT Efficient and scenic, the public riverboats on the Chao Phraya are a great way to get around the sights in the city center and are a remarkable window on local life. Boats operated by the **Chao Phraya Express Company** (✆ **02222-5330;** www.chaophrayaboat.co.th) trace the river's length, with stops at many piers (*tha* in Thai) on both the Thonburi side (west) and in central Bangkok (east). Good maps are posted at each stop. Most sightseers will board near Saphan Taksin BTS station, the last stop on the Silom Line as it meets the river. The major stops going into town from Saphan Taksin are Tha Ratchawong (in Chinatown off Ratchawong Rd.), Tha Thien (near Wat Po), Tha Chang (near the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), and Tha Maharaj (near Wat Mahathat). There is a range of boats available.

Tourist express boats, running between 9:30am and 3pm, are the fastest and most convenient, with guides talking over a microphone about the sights you'll pass at riverside. Short trips start at 19B (55¢/35p); an all-day pass, good for all riverboats, is 120B ($3.40/£2.20).

Express boats are long, white boats with pointed bow, bench seats, and open sides. Mention your destination when you board, and the attendant will tell you if it's the right boat (avoid the long-haul boats with colored flags on top). Trips start at 10B to 15B (30¢–40¢/20p–25p).

Cross-river ferries are another category; these are useful for getting to places such as Wat Arun or other sights in Thonburi.

Private boats are also for hire for tours. See "Bangkok's Waterways," under "What to See & Do" (p. 95), for details.

BY BUS Bangkok buses are cheap and frequent, if a bit confusing. Air-conditioned buses cost from 11B to 22B (30¢–60¢/20p–40p) and save you from inhaling lots of exhaust fumes. Buy a map, bring small change, and be careful of pickpockets.

BY TAXI Taxis are everywhere, or you can call ✆ **1681** for a pickup (20B/60¢/35p). The meter starts at 35B ($1/60p) for the first 3km (2 miles); thereafter, it's about 5B (15¢/10p) per kilometer. It is a good idea to have your hotel concierge or a Thai friend write out any destination in Thai. Avoid drivers who want to barter a flat fare. Tipping is appreciated.

BY CAR You'd have to be a bit mad to drive yourself around Bangkok, what with the crazy traffic, left-side driving (if you're not used to it), and aggressive tactics of cabs and trucks. It is best to hire a car with a driver. Contact **Diethelm Travel** (✆ **02255-9151-70;** www.diethelmtravel.com), a leader in the region, for assistance.

BY TUK-TUK As much a national symbol as the elephant, the tuk-tuk, a small, three-wheeled, open-sided vehicle powered by a motorcycle engine, is noisy (named for the putt-putt sound it makes), smoky, and offers lousy views, but can be good fun. Drivers whip around city traffic like kamikazes. They are not good for long hauls or during rush hour, but for short trips or off-peak hours, they're convenient and a real kick, especially for first-time visitors to Thailand.

All tuk-tuk fares are negotiated, usually beginning at 40B ($1.15/70p) for short trips. Bargain hard, but remember you'll always end up paying more than locals. ***Warning:*** Tuk-tuk drivers are notorious for talking travelers into shopping trips (and collecting commissions). Drivers will offer a very low fare, but will waste your time by stranding you at small, out-of-the-way gem and silk emporiums, all places that scam you and where the driver gets a cut. Insist on being taken directly to where you want to go.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI On every street corner, packs of drivers in colored vests play checkers, motorcycles standing by, waiting to shuttle passengers around the city. They are fast and can weave through traffic, but they are dangerous. Motorbike taxis are popular for short hops to the end of longer *sois,* or side streets, and cost from 10B (30¢/20p) for short trips. Put on the helmet, keep your knees tucked in, and hang on tight.

ON FOOT It is safe to walk around any part of town, but Bangkok is so spread out and the pollution so heavy that it's best to target a local area for pedestrian exploration.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

The **Bangkok Tourist Division** has offices at major tourist destinations throughout the city. Call ✆ **02225-7612** with any questions, or check out www.bangkoktourist.com.

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (**TAT;** www.tourismthailand.org) offers general information about the provinces and operates a useful hot line at ✆ **1672.** It has two counters in Suvarnabhumi International Airport, open from 8am to midnight, and the head office (✆ **02250-5500**) is at 1600 New Petchaburi Rd.

Numerous travel agencies offer local tours. **Diethelm Travel** (✆ **02255-9150;** www.diethelmtravel.com), a leader in the region, can arrange excursions of any length. **World Travel** (✆ **02233-5900**) and **Sea Tours** (✆ **02216-5783**) also have good services, with branches in some hotels. Any hotel concierge can make the necessary arrangements.

Fast Facts Bangkok

American Express There is an office with limited services at 388 Pahonyothin Rd. (✆ **02273-5500**).

Bookstores **Asia Books** carries a wide selection of regional works at its main branch, 221 Sukhumvit Rd., between Soi 15 and 17 (✆ **02252-7277**), and its many outlets in town and throughout the country.

Bookazine has a good selection at its various locations, in Patpong on the first floor at CP Tower, 313 Silom Rd. (✆ **02632-0130**); in Ploenchit on the third floor at Amarin Plaza, 498–502 Ploenchit Rd. (✆ **02656-1039**); and at 286 Siam Square, opposite Siam Center (✆ **02251-2641**).

Books Kinokuniya has shops in Pathumwan at the Isetan department store, 6th floor, CentralWorld, Ratchadamri Road (✆ **02255-9834**); at the Emporium shopping complex, third floor, 622 Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 24 (✆ **02664-8554**); and a huge outlet in the Siam Paragon mall (✆ **02610-9500**).

Numerous used bookstores willing to buy and trade can be found along Khao San Road and Soi Rambuttri in Banglamphu, Bangkok's main back packer haunt.

Currency Exchange Most banks will exchange foreign currency Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 3:30pm. Exchange booths affiliated with the major banks are found in all tourist areas, open daily from as early as 7am to as late as 9pm.

The largest banks in Thailand—such as **Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmers Bank, Siam Commercial Bank,** and **Bank of Ayudhya**—all perform debit and cash advance services through the MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/PLUS networks.

Many international banks also maintain offices in Bangkok, including **Bank of America,** 87/2 CRC Tower, Wireless Rd. (✆ **02305-2800**); **JP Morgan Chase,** 20 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02684-2805**); **Citibank,** 82 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02232-2000**);

National Australia Bank, 90 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02236-6016**); and **Standard Chartered Bank,** 90 Sathorn Nua Rd., Silom (✆ **02724-6345-52**). However, even if your bank has a branch in Thailand, your home account is considered foreign here—conducting personal banking will require special arrangements before leaving home.

Drugstores Bangkok has a great many pharmacies, though the drugs dispensed differ widely in quality, and generic knockoffs are common. Pack any prescription medications you require, and go to a hospital for refills.

Embassies **U.S.:** 120–22 Wireless Rd. (✆ **02205-4000;** http://thailand.usembassy.gov). **Canada:** 15th floor, Abdulrahim Place, 990 Rama IV Rd. (✆ **02636-0540;** www.bangkok.gc.ca). **Australia:** 37 S. Sathorn Rd. (✆ **02344-6300;** www.thailand.embassy.gov.au). **New Zealand:** 14th Floor, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Place, 87 Wireless Rd. (✆ **02254-2530;** www.nzembassy.com/thailand). **U.K.:** 14 Wireless Rd. (✆ **02305-8333;** www.britishembassy.gov.uk/thailand).

Emergencies In any emergency, first call Bangkok's **tourist police** at its direct-dial number (✆ **1155**) or at ✆ **02678-6800.** Someone at both numbers will speak English. Ambulance service is handled by private hospitals; see "Hospitals," below, or contact your hotel's front desk. For operator-assisted overseas calls, dial ✆ **100.**

Hospitals The best facility going is luxurious **Bumrungrad Hospital,** 33 Soi 3, Sukhumvit Road (✆ **02667-1000;** www.bumrungrad.com). The **BNH Hospital** (Bangkok Nursing Home) is at 9 Convent Rd., between Silom and Sathorn roads, south of Rama IV Road (✆ **02686-2700;** www.bnhhospital.com). Bring your passport and be ready to put up a deposit as high as 20,000B ($500/£280) before admittance. Bills must be settled before checking out.

Internet Access Most shopping malls and even the smallest hotels these days have at least a few Internet terminals, and you can't take a step without hitting one in places such as Khao San Road, the back packer area, or along busy Silom Road near Patpong. Prices usually range from 30B to 50B (85¢–$1.40/55p–90p) per hour. Big hotels charge exorbitant rates and are not worth it.

Luggage Storage Suvarnabhumi International Airport offers luggage storage for 100B ($2.85/£1.80) per day per bag, 24 hours a day. Most hotels will allow you to store luggage while away on trips in the countryside.

Mail If you're shipping a parcel from Bangkok, take advantage of the packing service offered by the **General Post Office (GPO) Post & Telegraph Office,** Charoen Krung Road, open Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday 8am to 1pm. Small cardboard packing cartons start at just 10B (30¢/20p); packing service is available during normal office hours. Telegraph and telephone service are available in the north end of the building. Ask at your hotel for branch offices located closer to you.

Newspapers & Magazines *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation,* English-language dailies, both cover local, national, and international news, plus happenings around town, TV listings, and other useful information (30B/85¢/55p). *Bangkok 101* (100B/$2.85/£1.80), found at most bookstores, is a good source of current information on what's happening in Bangkok, especially the entertainment and social scene. *BK Magazine* and *Look East* are slick monthly English-language magazines distributed

free, listing events in the city and including features on Bangkok, with lesser coverage of other Thai cities and provinces.

Police Call the **tourist police** at ✆ **1155** or 02678-6800, 24 hours a day, for assistance. English is spoken.

Safety Bangkok is a safe city, but be careful of pick pockets as you would anywhere. Don't seek trouble—avoid public disagreements or hostility (especially with locals), and steer clear of gambling activities. The city is safe, even alone at night in most parts, but rely on your gut instinct—if you get a bad feeling about a place or situation, remove yourself from the scene to avoid getting caught in someone else's drama.

Telephones Beware of hotel surcharges on international calls, which can be up to 50% (check with the hotel operator). Your best bet is the yellow, blue, or gray phones found in front of most convenience stores and in public places; these accept prepaid cards or coins. For directory inquiries, dial ✆ **1133.** See "Fast Facts: Thailand," earlier in this chapter, for additional information.

WHERE TO STAY

Bangkok supports a rich variety of hotels in all price categories—and luxury at a fraction of what you would pay elsewhere. Many hotels quote rates in U.S. dollars. Remember that prices listed here are the "rack rates" and should be considered only a guideline—be sure to search for discounts. Rates do not include the additional 7% value-added tax (VAT) and frequent service charge of 10%.

Along the River

Very Expensive

The Oriental, Bangkok ★★ A high-ranking member in the pantheon of the world's finest hotels, the Oriental makes for perhaps the most memorable stay in Bangkok. Its history dates from the 1860s, when the original hotel, no longer standing, was established by two Danish sea captains soon after King Mongkut (Rama IV) opened Siam to world trade. The hotel has withstood occupation by Japanese and American troops and played host to a long roster of Thai and international dignitaries and celebrities. Rooms in the older wing, built in 1876, pack the most colonial richness and charm. Those in the newer buildings (ca. 1958 and 1976) are certainly more spacious, some with better views of the river, but they sacrifice some of that Oriental hotel romance. It's the level and range of service, however, that distinguishes the Oriental from other riverfront hotels, and everyone from honeymooners to corporate execs is treated like a diplomat. Even if you don't stay, stop by for high tea in the oldest building, now called the Authors' Wing and housing luxury suites. The area was recently renovated and is one of the best-preserved pieces of old Bangkok.

48 Oriental Ave., Bangkok 10500 (on the riverfront off Charoen Krung Rd./New Rd.). ✆ **02659-9000.** Fax 02659-9284. www.mandarin-oriental.com. 393 units. $387 (£258) superior; $532 (£355) deluxe; from $666 (£444) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Saphan Taksin BTS station. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge w/world-class live jazz performances; 2 outdoor pools; 2 lighted outdoor tennis courts; state-of-the-art fitness center; luxurious spa w/sauna, steam, massage, and traditional Thai beauty treatments; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; helicopter transfer service; tour boats for river excursions; business center; upmarket shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms; cooking school. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

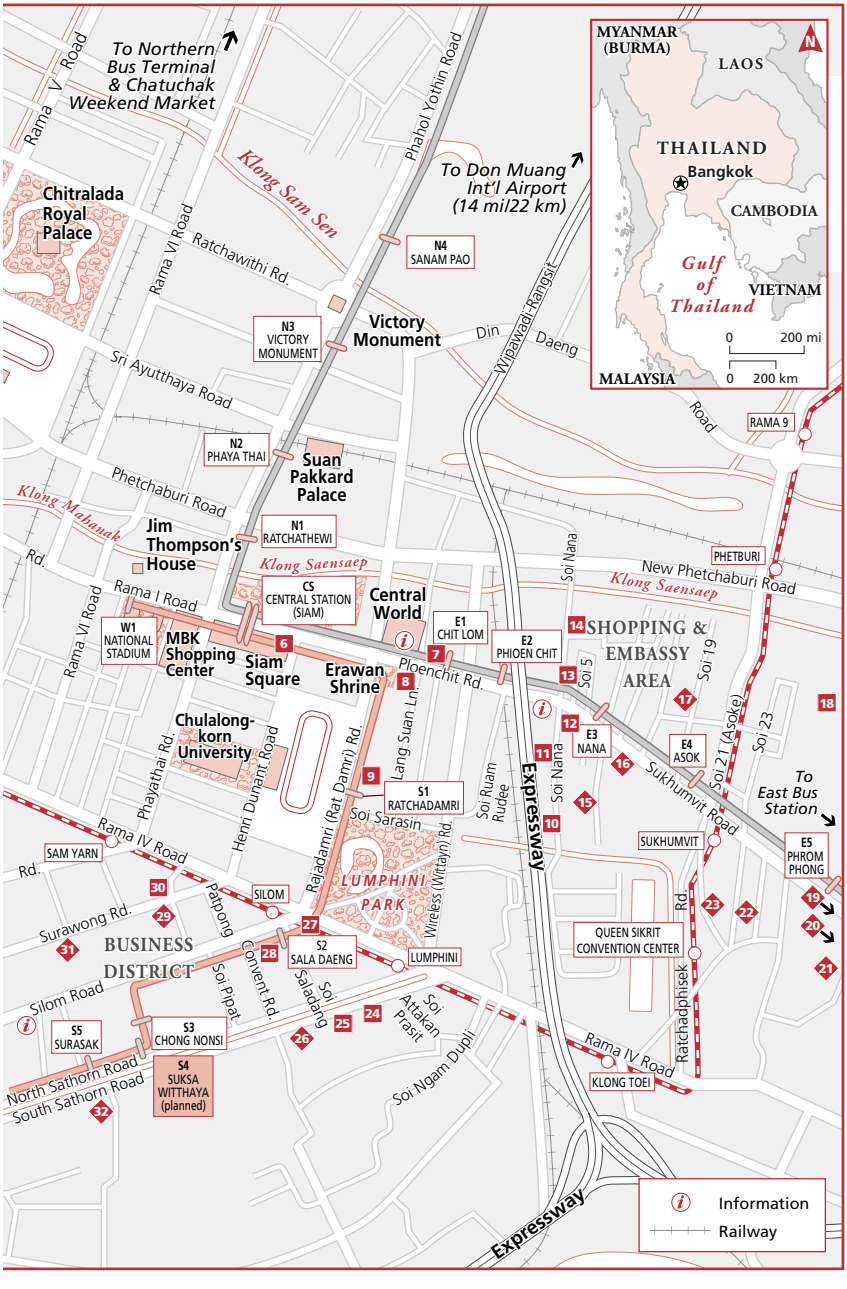
Where to Stay & Dine in Bangkok

ACCOMMODATIONS ■

Amari Boulevard Hotel **13**
The Atlanta Hotel **10**
Bangkok Christian Guesthouse **28**
Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa **39**
Buddy Lodge **2**
D & D Inn **3**
The Dusit Thani, Bangkok **27**
The Eugenia **18**
Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok **9**
Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok **8**
InterContinental Bangkok **7**
JW Marriott Bangkok **12**
Majestic Grande **11**
Metropolitan, Bangkok **24**
Millennium Hilton Bangkok **37**
Montien Hotel Bangkok **30**
New Siam II Guesthouse **1**
Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square **6**
The Oriental, Bangkok **34**
The Peninsula Bangkok **38**
Royal Hotel **5**
Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel & Towers **36**
Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok **33**
The Sukhothai **25**

DINING ◆

Baan Khanitha **26**
Bed Supperclub **17**
Blue Elephant **32**
Cabbages & Condoms **15**
Crepes & Co. **15**
Harmonique **35**
Koi **22**
Kuppa **23**
Le Banyan **16**
Lemongrass **21**
Le Normandie **34**
L'Opera **18**
Maha Naga **19**
Mango Tree **29**
May Kaidee **4**
Salathip **33**
Somboon Seafood **31**
Vientiane Kitchen **20**


To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
Rama V Road
Chitralada Royal Palace
Klong Sam Sen
Rama VI Road
Ratchawithi Rd
Phahol Yothin Road
To Don Muang Int'l Airport (14 mi/22 km)
N4 SANAM PAO
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
Victory Monument
Din Daeng
Vibhavadi-Rangsit Road
Sri Ayutthaya Road
N2 PHAYA THAI
Suan Pakkard Palace
Phetchaburi Road
Klong Mahanak
Jim Thompson's House
N1 RATCHATHEWI
Klong Saensaep
CS CENTRAL STATION (SIAM)
Central World
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHROM PHONG
14 SHOPPING & EMBASSY AREA
Soi 19
Soi 5
Soi Nana
New Phetchaburi Road
PHETBURI
RAMA 9
Rama I Road
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
MBK Shopping Center
Siam Square
Erawan Shrine
Ploenchit Rd.
Lang Suan Ln
Soi Ruam Rudee
Soi 21 (Asoke)
Soi 23
E4 ASOK
E3 NANA
Sukhumvit Road
To East Bus Station
Chulalongkorn University
Phayathai Rd
Henri Dunant Road
Rajadamri (Rat Damri) Rd.
S1 RATCHADAMRI
Soi Sarasin
Expressway
SUKHUMVIT
E5 PHROM PHONG
SAM YARN
Rama IV Road
LUMPHINI PARK
Wireless (Witayu) Rd
Patpong
SILOM
Surawong Rd.
BUSINESS DISTRICT
S2 SALA DAENG
LUMPHINI
QUEEN SIKRIT CONVENTION CENTER
Ratchadphisek Rd.
Silom Road
Convent Rd.
Soi Pipat
Soi Saladaeng
Soi Attakan Prasit
S5 SURASAK
S3 CHONG NONSI
S4 SUKSA WITTHAYA (planned)
North Sathorn Road
South Sathorn Road
Soi Ngam Duplee
KLONG TOEI
Rama IV Road
Expressway
Information
Railway
MYANMAR (BURMA)
LAOS
THAILAND
Bangkok
CAMBODIA
Gulf of Thailand
VIETNAM
MALAYSIA
0 200 mi
0 200 km

The Peninsula Bangkok ★★★ Whether you land on the helicopter pad and promenade into the exclusive top-floor lounge, roll in from the airport in one of the hotel's Rolls-Royce limousines, or step lightly off the wood-decked custom barges that ply the Chao Phraya, you'll feel like you've "arrived" however you get to the Peninsula, one of Bangkok's most deluxe accommodations. Every possible amenity is available here, from elegant dining to great activities and top-of-the-line business services. The rooms, some of the largest in town, all have river views and are done in a refined Thai and Western theme—a good marriage of Thai tradition and high-tech luxury, with wooden paneling, silk wallpaper, and attractive carpets. The technical features may make you feel like you've walked into a James Bond movie: Bedside control panels operate everything from the three phones and voice mail to the TV and even the mechanized curtains. The large marble bathrooms have separate vanity counters and a large tub with a hands-free phone and built-in TV monitor. "Ask and it will be done" seems to be the rule about service, and the multilingual staff is friendly and very accommodating.

333 Charoennakorn Rd., Klongsan, Bangkok 10600 (just across the Chao Praya River from Saphan Taksin station). ✆ **866/382-8388** in the U.S., or 02861-2888 in Bangkok. www.peninsula.com. 370 units. $330 (£220) standard; $360 (£240) deluxe; $500–$3,000 (£330–£2,000) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; 60m (197-ft.) 3-tiered pool; tennis court; state-of-the-art fitness center; full spa w/sauna, steam, massage, and aromatherapy; concierge; tour desk; car rental; fleet of Rolls-Royce limos; rooftop helicopter pad; tour boats and complimentary ferry service; business center; fine shopping; extensive salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms; rooms for those w/limited mobility. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, free Wi-Fi, minibar, hair dryer, safe, CD player, IDD phone.

Expensive

Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa ★★ Kids On the banks of the Chao Phraya, across the river and a few miles downstream from the heart of Bangkok, this resort is somewhat removed from the action and best reached via longtail boat. It's a short trip downriver, but you feel the crazy city release you from its grip. Once you're at the property, the big city seems a distant memory. The three wings of the hotel surround a large landscaped pool area with lily ponds and fountains, and there is a wonderful spa. Boats go to and from the River City shopping mall every half-hour until evening.

257 Charoen Nakhorn Rd., at the Krungthep Bridge, Bangkok 10600 (on the Thonburi/west side of the Chao Phraya River, 15 min. by boat from River City). ✆ **888/236-2427** in the U.S., or 02476-0022. Fax 02476-1120. w www.marriotthotels.com. 413 units. $245–$275 (£163–£183) double; from $345 (£230) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 3 bars; bakery; landscaped pool w/Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center w/sauna; spa w/massage and beauty treatments; children's programs; concierge; tour desk; limo service; dinner cruises; business center; adjoining shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Millennium Hilton Bangkok ★ Jutting into the Chao Phraya on the Thonburi side, the Hilton boasts some of the best views in the city, highlighted by the appropriately named rooftop jazz club ThreeSixty and the vertigo-inducing glass elevator that accesses it. All rooms and facilities are sleek, modern, and oriented toward the river. Like other Thai Hiltons, the guest rooms lack almost any Thai touches, but are comfortable nonetheless: soft carpeting, large bay windows, and mirror-laden marble bathrooms. The fourth-floor pool has a unique 1-foot-deep shelf with loungers and tables placed in the water, so you can sun, soak your feet, enjoy a cocktail, and watch the boats cruise the river. There's regular ferry service to the main pier in the event that you tire of being a spectator and decide to join the game.

123 Charoennakorn Rd., Klongsan, Bangkok 10600 (on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River, a 10-min. boat ride from Saphan Taksin pier). ✆ **02442-2000.** Fax 02442-2020. www.bangkok.hilton.com. 543 units. $170–$210 (£113–£140) double; from $230 (£153) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and lounge; bakery; pool overlooking river; spa w/sauna, steam, massage; concierge; tour desk; car rental; complimentary ferry service; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel & Towers ★ The Royal Orchid has magnificent views of the Chao Phraya and makes an excellent base for shopping or sightseeing. The rooms are spacious, pastel hued, and trimmed with warm teakwood, lending a refined and distinctly Thai ambience. The Sheraton Towers, a hotel within a hotel on the 26th through 28th floors (with its own check-in desk and express elevator), offers more ornate decor and a higher level of service for a premium; Sheraton Tower suites, for example, come with 24-hour butlers and personal fax machines. Recent renovations include the luxurious Mandara spa and a state-of-the-art fitness center. The large pool area makes it easy to forget the big, crowded city. Try the hotel's many fine-dining options such as Etc . . . . A walkway leads to the popular River City shopping complex next door.

2 Captain Bush Lane, Siphya Rd., Bangkok 10500 (next to River City mall). ✆ **800/325-3535** in the U.S. or 02266-0123. Fax 02236-8320. www.starwoodhotels.com. 734 units. $180–$220 (£120–£147) double; from $250 (£167) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Complimentary boat service to Saphan Taksin BTS station. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; 2 outdoor pools open 24 hr.; outdoor floodlit tennis court; 24-hr. fitness center w/sauna; luxurious spa w/private plunge pools, steam, massage, and beauty treatments; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; 24-hr. business center; small shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, free in-room movies, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok ★★ The modern, opulent Shangri-La, on the banks of the Chao Phraya, boasts acres of polished marble and two towers with breathtaking views of the river. All units are outfitted with lush carpeting, teak furniture, and marble bathrooms. The views are terrific from the higher-floor deluxe rooms, and most have either a balcony or a small sitting room, making them closer to junior suites and a particularly good value for on-the-river upscale accommodations. For such an enormous place, the level of service and facilities is surprisingly good. The moody Chi Spa, whose design was inspired by Tibetan temple architecture, is one of the top hotel spas in town—highly recommended. The luxurious Krung Thep Wing adds another 17-story tower to the grounds, as well as a riverside swimming pool, restaurant, and breakfast lounge. Guests here register in their spacious rooms, surrounded by colorful Thai paintings and glistening Thai silk.

89 Soi Wat Suan Plu, Charoen Krung Rd. (New Rd.), Bangkok 10500 (adjacent to Sathorn Bridge, with access off Chaoren Krung Rd. at south end of Silom Rd.). ✆ **866/565-5050** in the U.S., or 02236-7777. Fax 02236-8579. www.shangri-la.com. 799 units. 7,400B–12,000B ($211–$343/£135–£218) double; from 13,500B ($386/£245) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Next to Saphan Taksin BTS station. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lounge and bar; spa; 2 outdoor pools w/outdoor Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; 2 squash courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage, and aerobics classes; spa; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; helicopter transfer; city shuttle service; dinner cruises; business center; small shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Banglamphu & Khao San Road

Most of the major tourist sights are here, making sightseeing on foot more feasible, though it's quite a long ride from commercial Bangkok. For budget travelers, the widest range of low-price accommodations is found in this area around Khao San Road. There

are a number of good values, but the best of the lot is the **New Siam II Guesthouse** (50 Trok Rong Mhai, Phra Ahtit Rd.; ✆ **02282-2795;** www.newsiam.net), with a pool and spotless fan and air-conditioned rooms going for 720B ($21/£13) and 840B ($24/£15), respectively. On Khao San Road, the **Buddy Lodge** (265 Khao Sa Rd.; ✆ **02629-4477;** www.buddylodge.com) is your best choice, with tidy air-conditioned rooms from 2,200B ($63/£40). The **D & D Inn** (68–70 Khao San Rd.; ✆ **02629-0526;** www.khaosanby.com) has clean but basic doubles starting at only 750B ($21/£14).

Moderate

Royal Hotel ★ Near Thammasat University along the big, busy boulevard of Ratchadamnoen, the cozy Royal Hotel is just a 5-minute walk from the Royal Palace. It's good for budget-minded sightseers who don't want to stay on crazy Khao San, but short of being near some of the major sights, the Royal isn't particularly convenient for getting around Bangkok. The glitzy lobby, with polished marble floors, chandeliers, and massive Corinthian columns, was built in the 1950s and is a fun architectural pastiche from the Art Deco era. The hotel gained fame as the major field hospital during the May 1991 democracy demonstrations. Clean, kitschy rooms have lots of overly florid filigree and pink, ruffled dusters, but are spacious and have high ceilings. With a small pool and all the basic amenities, you're just a short walk from the useful tour services on Khao San, but it's quiet and a bit more grown-up here.

Ratchadamnoen Ave., Bangkok 10200 (2 blocks east of National Museum). ✆ **02222-9111.** Fax 02224-2083. 300 units. 1,200B ($34/£22) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; car rental; courtesy car or limo; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar.

The Business District

Don't be put off by the "business district" name, which is merely to distinguish this area from the others. This part of town is connected by skytrain and subway and is home of Silom Road, the center of Bangkok nightlife.

Very Expensive

Metropolitan, Bangkok ★ The Metropolitan is fashioned after the famed property in London and is one of Bangkok's hippest houses of style. The chic, modular lobby and crisply dressed staff could easily be mistaken for the velvet-rope crowd at an upscale urban club. Rooms are elegantly angular and quite stark at first glance, but there are lots of warm touches, such as earth-toned fabrics and overstuffed pillows, to offset the crisp, contemporary lines. Bathrooms are large, with big sunken tubs. This is a stylish getaway with some cool dining choices and a slick bar.

27 S. Sathorn Rd., Tungmahamek, Sathorn, Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02625-3322-4.** Fax 02625-3320. www.metropolitan.como.bz. 171 units. $250–$310 (£167–£207) double; from $350 (£233) suite. AE, MC, V. Short cab ride from Sala Daeng BTS station, and just a short walk to the Lumpini subway stop. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; great fitness center; spa w/massage, Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; airport transfer; business center w/Internet access; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD and CD players, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

The Sukhothai ★★★ Find a welcome, if studied, serenity in this hotel's maze of low pavilions, contemporary lines, and earthy textures and tones. Broad, colonnaded public spaces surround peaceful lotus pools. Symmetry and simplicity form the backdrop for brick *chedis* (stupas or mounds), terra-cotta friezes, and celadon ceramics evoking the ancient kingdom of Sukhothai. Large guest rooms are done in fine Thai silk, mellow

teak, and celadon tile. Gigantic luxurious bathrooms feature oversize tubs and two full-size wardrobes. The Sukhothai is second to none in service and privacy, and offers an indulgent spa experience as well.

13/3 S. Sathorn Rd., Bangkok 10120 (south of Lumphini Park, near intersection of Rama IV and Wireless roads, next to the YWCA). ✆ **02344-8888.** Fax 02344-8899. www.sukhothai.com. 220 units. 12,000B ($343/£218) double; from 17,200B ($491/£313) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; 25m (82-ft.) outdoor pool; outdoor floodlit tennis court; air-conditioned racquetball court; state-of-the-art fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage, and aerobics classes; concierge; limo service; 24-hr. business center w/cutting-edge technology; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, fax, dataport w/direct Internet access, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

The Dusit Thani, Bangkok ★ "The Dusit" was once the city's grandest address, but Bangkok has built up around the old girl, and now the Dusit lies in the shadow of the skytrain and a hulking highway flyover. Still, the location is one of the best, just at the edge of the busiest part of Silom Road and a short walk from the skytrain, subway, and Lumpini Park. The lobby has splashing fountains, and the large outdoor pool is surrounded by thick foliage—a great escape after a day of sightseeing. Renovated rooms have brought the Dusit into the 21st century: They eschew the traditional Thai motif of years past for a more up-to-date business look, with club rooms adding high-speed Internet access and flatscreen TVs. The Devarana spa is world-class, and there are numerous quality in-house dining choices as well.

Rama IV Rd., Bangkok 10500 (at corner of Silom and Rama IV roads, opposite Lumpini Park). ✆ **02200-9000.** Fax 02236-6400. http://bangkok.dusit.com. 517 units. 6,125B–9,800B ($175–$280/£111–£178) double; from 11,000B ($314/£200) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Near Sala Daeng BTS station. **Amenities:** 8 restaurants; lounge; bar; library w/high tea; small landscaped pool; driving range and putting green; fitness center; spa w/massage, sauna, steam, and cafe; concierge; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/VCR, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Montien Hotel Bangkok ★ The Montien is a slick and comfortable business hotel in the very heart of Silom, right at the terminus of the two busy Patpong *sois*. Set up in two large wings, each with dark teak hallways and bright, pleasant rooms, the Montien has seen some good upgrades in recent years and offers lots of services and upmarket amenities at a price that would put you in a dull cell in other parts of the world. Unique here, too, are the resident psychics at the mezzanine level's Astrologers' Terrace, open daily from 10:30am to 7pm.

54 Surawong Rd., Bangkok 10500 (near Patpong). ✆ **02233-7060.** Fax 02236-5218. www.montien.com. 475 units. 3,500B–6,500B ($100–$186/£64–£118) double; from 9,000B ($257/£164) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to Sala Daeng BTS station. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; lounge and karaoke; outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna; tour desk; limo service; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Bangkok Christian Guesthouse A wholesome yin to the debauched yang of the nearby red-light district, the Bangkok Christian Guesthouse is on a small *soi* just 1 street back from Sala Daeng BTS station and is a convenient, quiet, and comfortable choice. This tranquil two-story guesthouse, originally a Presbyterian missionary residence, was converted into a lodge in the late 1960s, and is now operated by the Church of Christ

in Thailand. The recently refurbished rooms are large and simple. The best ones are on the second floor overlooking the large lawn, with its sitting area, goldfish pond, and teak pavilion. Amenities include a cozy lounge and library, an affordable canteen restaurant, and a friendly and helpful staff.

123 Saladaeng, Soi 2, Convent Rd., Bangkok 10500 (1 block south of Silom Rd. off the corner of Convent Rd.). ✆ **02233-6303.** Fax 02237-1742. www.bcgh.org. 57 units. 1,400B ($40/£25) double; 1,800B ($51/£33) triple. No credit cards. 10-min. walk to Sala Daeng BTS station. **Amenities:** Restaurant; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, no phone.

Sukhumvit Road: The Shopping/Embassy Area

Accessed along its entire length by the convenient skytrain, Sukhumvit Road is the heart of upscale, commercial Bangkok. Here you'll find many of the town's finest large shopping complexes, good restaurants, and thronging street life.

Very Expensive

Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok ★★★ The Four Seasons is a modern palace. The impeccable service begins at the threshold, and an air of luxury pervades any stay in this modern city resort. Rooms are some of the most spacious in town, with Thai murals, plush carpeted dressing areas, and large bathrooms. Cabanas face the pool and terrace area, which is filled with palms, lotus pools, and all sorts of tropical greenery. If you can ignore the new condominium blocks overlooking the area, this is a real hideaway. The Four Seasons Spa is one of the best in Bangkok, and the in-house dining is excellent. The executive upgrade for just $35 (£19) is more than worth it.

155 Ratchadamri Rd., Bangkok 10330 (just south of Rama I Rd.). ✆ **800/819-5053** in the U.S. or 02250-1000. Fax 02253-9195. www.fourseasons.com. 353 units. $250–$320 (£167–£213) double; $410–$480 (£273–£320) cabana room/suite; from $630 (£420) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Adjacent to Ratchadamri BTS station. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge w/high tea and live jazz; landscaped outdoor pool; state-of-the-art fitness center; spa w/massage, sauna, and steam; concierge; limo service; 24-hr. business center; shopping arcade (w/Jim Thompson Silk); salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone, iPod.

Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok ★★★ Bangkok's old grande dame, the Grand Hyatt is tops in comfort, convenience, and style. Don't miss the Erawan shrine, a monument to prosperity and good luck dating from the 1956 construction of the previous hotel (the Erawan) on this site. The works of dozens of contemporary Thai artists grace hallways and spacious guest rooms, where earth-toned silks, celadon accessories, antique-finish furnishings, parquet floors, Oriental rugs, large bathrooms, and city views abound. Accommodations feature individual reading lights, Internet access, and compact control panels. In addition to the facilities one expects from a five-star hotel, there is a delightful fifth-floor pool terrace here, where a waterfall tumbles down a rocky wall into a full-size hot tub. The in-house dining is some of the best in the city, especially at Spasso, the Italian restaurant.

494 Ratchadamri Rd., Bangkok 10330 (corner of Rama I Rd.). ✆ **02254-1234.** Fax 02254-6308. www.bangkok.grand.hyatt.com. 380 units. $225–$390 (£150–£260) double; $700 (£467) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Chit Lom BTS station. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lounge; disco; wine bar; rooftop pool and garden; outdoor grass tennis court; 2 squash courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; spa; concierge; tour desk; limo and helicopter service; 24-hr. business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

InterContinental Bangkok ★★ Formerly Le Meridien, the InterContinental has a great location near Chit Lom BTS station and downtown shopping. Rooms are immaculate, done in a bland but familiar business-hotel style and set in a glass-and-steel tower block with unobstructed views of the city. High-end suites are without rival, and service is ultraprofessional and attentive. You pay a premium here, but you get perks such as wireless Internet access, excellent amenities, and fine dining; don't miss its branch of the popular Shin Daikoku Japanese restaurant.

973 Ploenchit Rd., Lumphini, Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330 (near intersection of Rama I and Ratchadamri roads). ✆ **02656-0444.** Fax 02656-0555. www.intercontinental.com. 381 units. $230–$290 (£153–£193) double; from $335 (£223) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Adjacent to Chit Lom BTS station. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; rooftop pool and bar; health club; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage, and beauty treatments; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

JW Marriott Bangkok ★★ If you're looking for luxury but also need to stay wired for business back home (or you just have a bunch of high-tech gadgets), look no further than the JW Marriott. All rooms and common areas have wireless Internet access, and executive-level guests enjoy a lounge of their own. Rooms are decorated in a pleasing contemporary style with the plush bedding common to all Marriott properties and large marble-laden bathrooms. What makes them unique are the power strips that allow you to hook up your electronic devices to the room's flatscreen TV. For those looking for less sedentary perks, the hotel has a well-equipped health club and spa. In-house dining is some of the best in the city, and the skytrain is a short walk away.

4 Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 2, Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02656-7700.** Fax 02656-7711. www.marriott.com. 441 units. $210 (£140) superior; $280 (£187) executive; from $355 (£237) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Ploenchit BTS station. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 3 bars; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa w/sauna, steam, and attached juice bar; concierge; car rental; limo service; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Amari Boulevard Hotel ★ In the heart of the busy Nana shopping area of Sukhumvit Road (near the BTS Nana station), the Amari Boulevard is a good value. The newer, pyramid-shaped Krung Thep Wing has spacious rooms with terrific city views, while the original wing has less expensive rooms, some with a balcony. The hotel is in the heart of Sukhumvit's nightclub action, which can be a blessing or a curse depending on what you're here for. Also see its popular business address, the nearby **Amari Watergate** (✆ **02653-9000**).

2 Soi 5, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110 (north of Sukhumvit Rd., on Soi 5). ✆ **02255-2930.** Fax 02255-2950. www.amari.com. 309 units. $235 (£157) double; $452 (£301) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Nana BTS station. **Amenities:** Restaurant; rooftop pool; fitness center; concierge; tour desk; limo service; business center; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square ★★ This elegant and opulent high-rise hotel in the Siam Square shopping area is one of this French chain's best. Guest rooms are sharp: business chic dominated by earth tones, minus superfluous Thai touches. Bathrooms have the TV's sound wired in. Novotel is perfect for business or shopping trips and close to the skytrain. Don't miss CM2, one of the city's most popular nightclubs (located in the basement), which has live music 6 nights a week.

Siam Sq. Soi 6, Bangkok 10330 (in Siam Sq. off Rama I Rd.). ✆ **02209-8888.** Fax 02255-1824. www.novotel.com or www.novotelbkk.com. 429 units. 3,600B–4,300B ($103–$123/£65–£78) double; from 6,800B ($194/£124) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Siam BTS station. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 5 bars; huge popular nightclub; outdoor pool; fitness center w/massage; concierge; tour desk; limo service; business center w/Internet access; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

The Eugenia Set in a quiet *soi* off Sukhumvit, this delightful 19th-century, colonial-style house offers just a dozen rooms to discerning travelers who are looking for something a bit special for their stay in Bangkok. Rooms are equipped with period furnishings, part of the owner's eclectic collection from travels around the world. There's also a fleet of vintage Jaguars and Mercedes, which are available for rent for sightseeing or airport transfers.

267 Sukhumvit Soi 31, Bangkok 10110 (btw. Sukhumvit and New Petchaburi roads). ✆ **02259-9017-9.** Fax 02259-9010. www.theeugenia.com. 12 units. 5,800B–7,200B ($166–$206/£105–£131) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 15-min walk to Asok BTS station. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; swimming pool; library; pavilion. *In room:* A/C, cable TV, hair dryer, safe, phone.

Majestic Grande ★★ (Value) For location and price, you can't beat the Majestic Grande. Just off busy Sukhumvit Road and a short walk or shorter complimentary tuk-tuk ride to the skytrain, the Majestic is perfect for shoppers, sightseers, and partyers alike. Superior rooms are smaller than those in the more expensive hotels in the area, but the suites are very spacious, and all rooms are modern and superclean. Wood flooring around the beds is flanked by smooth marble leading to tidy bathrooms, some with separate tubs and showers. Facilities are also on the small side, but are all present and accounted for: pool, fitness center, business center, and two restaurants. A highly professional staff rounds out the plaudits, making the Majestic the top midrange choice on Sukhumvit.

12 Sukhumvit Soi 2, Bangkok 10110 (just south of Sukhumvit Rd.). ✆ **02262-2999.** Fax 02262-2900. www.majesticgrande.com. 251 units. 3,300B–4,700B ($94–$134/£60–£85) double; from 7,900B ($226/£144) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk from Ploenchit BTS station. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby lounge; small outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna, steam, Jacuzzi, and massage; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi and broadband Internet access, minibar, safe, coffeemaker, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

The Atlanta Hotel ★ (Finds) A great budget choice, the Atlanta is a real slice of history. The oldest "original" hotel in the city (without renovation), the Atlanta was built in 1952. Enjoy fine Thai food in the canteen (guests only), grab a book from the small library, or take in a film—a good youth-hostel vibe pervades. Rooms are concrete basic, and only a few suites have hot water. Service is quirky (a sign explains: no complaints at these prices), and the "no drugs and no sex tourism" policy tends to the holier-than-thou. It seems that the staff considers all Asian women prostitutes, so even if you're married, mixed-race couples tend to get a less than welcome reception. The works of journalists and photographers in residence line the walls. The hotel is often full, so it's best to book ahead by fax.

78 Soi 2, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110 (at the very end of Soi 2, a 5- to 10-min. walk or a 10B/30¢/20p motorbike taxi ride). ✆ **02252-6069.** Fax 02656-8123. www.theatlantahotelbangkok.com. 59 units. 500B–700B ($14–$20/£9.10–£13) fan room; 800B ($23/£15) A/C double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small outdoor pool; small gym area; good tour desk; laundry service; library (w/light table for photographers); Internet access. *In room:* A/C, safe (bring your own lock).

The Airport Area

If you'd rather give Bangkok a miss, but need somewhere to rest up near the airport while waiting for a connecting flight, this is the only reasonable option.

Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel ★ Located just a short walk or shuttle-bus ride from the airport terminal, the Novotel echoes Suvarnabhumi's massive proportions with its huge, bright, and delightfully tranquil lobby. The Novotel is as much a business hotel as a layover spot, sporting extensive convention and business facilities, as well as the airport's best dining options. Rooms are comfortable affairs, with soothing carpeting and large marble bathrooms. The spa has treatments catering to the weary traveler, and there's an attractive swimming pool. Day rates are also available, allowing visitors access to all hotel facilities.

999 Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel, Moo 1 Nong prue Bang Phli, Bangkok 10540. ✆ **02131-1111.** Fax 02131-1188. www.novotel.com. 612 units. 5,000B ($143/£91) deluxe; 6,200B ($177/£113) executive deluxe; 8,500B ($243/£155) suite. Day rates from 4,500B ($129/£82). AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lobby lounge; coffee shop; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa w/massage and beauty treatments; children's programs; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi and broadband Internet access, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Along the River

Very Expensive

Le Normandie ★★★ FRENCH The ultraelegant Normandie, set atop the Oriental Hotel and enjoying fabulous views over the river, is the apex in formal dining in Thailand. The room glistens in gold and silver, from place settings to chandeliers. Some of the highest-rated master chefs from France have made guest appearances here, adding their own touches to the menu. Choose from a limited selection of tempting daily specials, such as roast half Brittany lobster with caviar and frothy bisque. The set menu (both lunch and dinner) includes a cheese course, coffee, and a sinful dessert. Order any wine you can imagine from the extensive list.

At the Oriental, 48 Oriental Ave. (off Charoen Krung/New Rd., overlooking the river). ✆ **02659-9000.** Reservations required at least 1 day in advance. Jacket/tie required for men. Main courses 1,050B–4,300B ($30–$123/£19–£78); set menu w/wine selections 7,300B ($209/£133). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 7–10:30pm (closed Sun lunch). 10-min. walk from Saphan Taksin BTS station.

Expensive

Blue Elephant ★ THAI The Blue Elephant franchises have been serving their brand of royal Thai cuisine throughout Europe and the Middle East since 1980. It was only in 2002 that the company opened a branch in Bangkok. Set in a 100-year-old colonial building that served as the Imperial Japanese Command Center during World War II, the restaurant is an oasis of refinement on busy South Sathorn Road. The dining rooms are decorated with traditional Thai-style statues and carvings, but they retain their colonial charm. The menu is a mix of classic Thai recipes and the chefs' original creations. If you have any questions about a particular dish, a member of the very professional waitstaff is always eager to assist.

The Blue Elephant has an excellent cooking school on the third floor of the building (see "Cultural Pursuits," p. 101). Also look for the Blue Elephant Cafe on the fourth floor of Siam Paragon mall.

233 S. Sathorn Rd. ✆ **02673-9353.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 240B–490B ($6.85–$14/£4.35–£8.90); set menus 1,300B–1,450B ($37–$41/£24–£26). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm. Surasak BTS station.

Moments **Dinner & Lunch Cruises on the Chao Phraya**

While there are a number of tour operators that offer dinner cruises along the Chao Phraya, if you want to eat the finest food, there are a couple of cruises that stand out. The ***Manohra*** ★★, a converted antique rice barge, cruises the river nightly, serving six Thai dishes that are delicious (and not overly spicy). The set menu runs 1,990B ($57/£36) per person, and *Manohra* sets sail at 7:30pm (but you can pick it up at the Taksin pier, where it stops at about 7:45pm). Call the **Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa** (✆ **02476-0022**) for details, and be sure to book in advance to make sure the boat isn't rented out for a private party.

The ***Horizon II*** also makes evening cruises for a romantic candlelit meal starting at 7:30pm (2,400B/$69/£44). Contact the **Shangri-La Hotel** (✆ **02236-7777**) for more information.

Salathip ★★ THAI Salathip, on the river terrace of the Shangri-La Hotel, is arguably Bangkok's most romantic Thai restaurant. Classical music and traditional cuisine are superbly presented in aging, carved-teak pavilions perched over a lotus pond and overlooking the river (there are also air-conditioned dining rooms). Set menus introduce you to a range of courses, from pomelo salad with chicken to your choice of Thai curries. There is live music nightly as well as Thai dancing and a culture show.

At the Shangri-La Hotel, 89 Soi Wat Suan Plu (overlooking Chao Phraya River, near Taksin Bridge). ✆ **02236-7777.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 320B–1,400B ($9.15–$40/£5.80–£25). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6:30–10:30pm. Saphan Taksin BTS station.

Moderate

Harmonique ★★ THAI Hard to find, Harmonique is set in the courtyard of a century-old mansion and oozes character—a great stop if you're touring the riverfront or visiting the antiques stores of nearby River City. Enter through the crook of a dangling banyan tree to find courtyard seating and an open-air dining area with Thai antiques. The cuisine is Thai tailored to Western tastes, but it's still very good—the *tom yum* with fish is delicious, served only as spicy as you like and with enormous chunks of fish. The sizzling grilled seafood platter is nice and garlicky (chilis on the side). Harmonique also has good Western desserts such as brownies, great with a cool tea on a hot day. It's an atmospheric spot to relax.

22 Chaoren Krung Rd. (New Rd.), Soi 34. ✆ **02237-8175.** Main courses 80B–240B ($2.30–$6.85/£1.45–£4.35). AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–10pm. 15-min. walk from Saphan Taksin BTS station.

Banglamphu & Khao San Road

Khao San Road is Bangkok's busy backpacker ghetto and where you'll find every manner of food, from Israeli and halal cuisine to Italian fare and tasty Thai served street side. Have a seat somewhere along the busy road, order a fruit shake, and watch the nightly parade of young travelers. **Cafe Primavera** (56 Phra Sumen Rd.; ✆ **02281-4718**), across from Phra Sumen Fort, serves excellent pizzas and pastas. Just down the street is **Baan Pla Sod** (114 Phra Ahtit Rd.; ✆ **02629-3339**). The name means "house of fresh fish,"

and that's about all they ser ve, but they do it v ery well. At this popular dinner spot for locals, no English is spoken, but menus have translations.

Inexpensive

May Kaidee ★ Finds VEGETARIAN/THAI Don't come for atmospher e—it's more or less just tables in a little alleyway—but bring your appetite for healthy and delicious Thai vegetarian dishes. Ms. May (pronounced *My*) has developed a real following, as much for her wry smile and kindness as for the great curries and soups she serves. The best *massaman* (potato and peanut) curr y in Thailand and an array of dishes—fr om sweet green curry to good stir-fries—come with your choice of white or a short-grained brown rice. For dessert, don't pass up the black sticky rice with mango. May has a good cookbook for sale and also offers cooking classes. Look for her second location at 33 S amsen Rd.

At the eastern terminus of Khao San Rd., in a small alley behind the first row of buildings (behind Burger King; ask ar ound—everyone k nows this plac e). ✆ **02-281-7699.** M ain c ourses 60B–120B ($1.70–$3.40/£1.10–£2.20). No credit cards. Daily 9am–11pm.

The Business District

Silom Road is where you'll find Patpong, the busy red-light district, a tourist night market, and a host of good dining choices.

Moderate

Baan Khanitha ★★ THAI While the location on busy Sathorn Road lacks some of the charm of its pr evious incarnation, B aan Khanitha still offers authentic Thai in a comfortable, classy atmosphere. You'll start off with a free tray of finger foods, the dried condiments for making y our own spicy spring r olls called *mienkham,* and then y ou'll graduate to shared dishes of curry, from spicy red to mellow yellow and green; light salads; and good seafood as y ou like it. The pomelo salad is a find. F ollow up with good Thai desserts. Thais actually come her e, a rarity for upscale Thai eateries, and the place is always packed: both good signs. Be sure to call ahead. There's another location at 36/1 Sukhumvit Soi 23 (✆ **02258-4128**).

69 S. Sathorn Rd. ✆ **02675-4200.** Reservations highly recommended. Main courses 160B–520B ($4.55–$15/£2.90–£9.45). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm. 5-min. walk fr om Ploen Chit BTS station.

Mango Tree ★ THAI In a lovely 80-year-old Siamese restaurant house with its own tropical garden, the Mango Tree offers a quiet retreat from the hectic Patpong area. Live traditional music and classical Thai decorative touches fill the house with charm, and the attentive staff serves well-prepared dishes from all regions of the country. The mild green chicken curry and the crispy spring r olls are both excellent—but the menu is extensiv e,

Tips Bangkok Street Eats

Ask any Bangkokian to take you to his favorite restaurant, and you'll most likely be eating street side or in a small, open-air eatery. In fact, the many night bazaars and hawker stalls are where you'll find the best eats throughout Thailand. For the best open-air dining, try **Thong Lo,** a collection of busy stalls just adjacent to the Thong Lo BTS stop. **Suan Lum Night Bazaar,** next to Lumpini Park, is another good choice.

so feel free to experiment. Only trouble is, the food isn't exactly authentic—though it's still quite good.

37 Soi Tantawan, Bangrak (off west end of Surawong Rd., across from Tawana Ramada Hotel). ✆ **02236-2820.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 180B–450B ($5.15–$13/£3.25–£8.20). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight. 10-min. walk from Sala Daeng BTS station.

Somboon Seafood ★★ SEAFOOD This one's for those who would sacrifice atmosphere for excellent food. Though it's packed nightly, you'll still be able to find a table, as the place is huge. The staff is extremely friendly—between them and the picture menu, you'll be able to order the best dishes and get the finest recommendations. Peruse the large aquariums outside to see all the live seafood options, such as prawn, fish, lobsters, and crabs (guaranteed freshness). The house specialty, chili crab curry, is especially good, as is the *tom yang goong* soup (spiced to individual taste).

169/7–11 Surawongse Rd. (just across from the Peugeot building). ✆ **02233-3104.** Reservations not necessary. Seafood at market prices (about 800B/$23/£15 for 2 people). No credit cards. Daily 4–11pm.

Sukhumvit Road: The Shopping/Embassy Area

Expensive

Bed Supperclub ★★ INTERNATIONAL This is the coolest place in Bangkok, hands down. Come for a drink in the bar, at least, and stick around for when the place busts into a full-on club. It serves meals at one seating only (8:30pm); the best part is that, as the name suggests, you eat in long shared beds. You walk up a concrete gangplank to enter the giant cylinder-shaped building via large airplane airlocks. One side of the room is the bar, while the other is the dining area, where you'll be assigned your slot on one of the two big beds that line the walls. The two-story, glowing white-and-neon interior alone is unique. The set menu of four courses changes every day, and rarely disappoints. Dessert is pure decadence of rich chocolate specials and cakes. The waitstaff wears tight spacesuits and angel wings, the music is funky trance spun by a DJ, and the food is fantastic.

26 Sukhumvit Soi 11, Klongtoey-Nua (at the end of Soi 11). ✆ **02651-3537.** www.bedsupperclub.com. Reservations required. Men should wear trousers, not shorts. Set menu 1,350B ($39/£25) Tues–Thurs; 1,750B ($50/£32) Fri–Sat. AE, MC, V. Tues–Thurs 7:30pm–midnight; Fri–Sat 7:30pm–2am. Dinner served promptly at 8:30pm (best to be early). Nana BTS station.

Koi ★★ JAPANESE Modern modular Japanese pavilions set in a quiet, fountain-laden garden; slick black and blood-red interior; moody candle lighting; and beautiful people doing beautiful-people things at the bar. A case of style over substance? Not at all. One of the hippest restaurants in the city, Koi serves outstanding Japanese food with subtle California twists and some of the best sushi in town. One of the house specialty rolls is braised shrimp over a California roll, a circular sushi fort guarding helpless teriyaki shrimp, mushrooms, and asparagus. It's delicious, as is anything on the menu containing the words "sushi" or "chocolate cake." The service is decidedly unpretentious for a restaurant of such style.

26 Sukhumvit Soi 20, Klongtoey (a 5-min. walk down Soi 20). ✆ **02258-1590.** www.koirestaurantbkk.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 320B–2,300B ($9.15–$66/£5.80–£42). AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 6pm–midnight. Asok BTS station.

Le Banyan ★★ FRENCH A spreading banyan tree on the edge of the gardenlike grounds inspires the name. The upscale dining area is warm in tone, with sisal matting and white-clapboard walls adorned with Thai carvings, old photos, and prints of early

Tips Dinner & Dance

For an evening of Thai culture and cuisine, try the **Sala Rim Nam,** at the Oriental (✆ **02437-6211**), which stages Thai dance performances. An opulent evening night out here costs 3,400B ($97/£62) per person. An affordable cultural evening can be found at the **Supatra River House** (✆ **02411-0305**) on Friday and Saturday nights; call ahead for details.

Bangkok. The house special is a dish for two: pressed duck with gooseliver, shallots, wine, and Armagnac to make the sauce. Other fine choices include a rack of lamb with herb-and-walnut crust and Swedish salmon with butter and lemon. There are daily specials and a list of fine wines as well. If you come on foot, you'll run the gauntlet of all the girly bars at the entrance of the *soi,* but find this little upscale gem and enjoy an evening of fine dining and effusive service.

59 Sukhumvit Soi 8 (1 block south of Sukhumvit Rd.). ✆ **02253-5556.** www.le-banyan.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 360B–1,990B ($10–$57/£6.55–£36). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6:30–9:30pm. 10-min. walk from Nana BTS station.

Maha Naga ★★ THAI/WESTERN FUSION Classy Maha Naga is an oasis of luxury Thai dining in the heart of the Sukhumvit area. The restaurant design features a fountain courtyard surrounded by high-peaked, lavishly decorated, and air-conditioned Thai pavilions—it makes for a quiet, romantic evening or a fun night for private groups. The food is delicious, a bold marriage of Thai and Western traditions in dishes such as pork chops with spicy Thai *som tam* (papaya salad) flavor, whole lobster done in a chili sauce, or imported New Zealand grilled filet with Thai spice and mint. Elsewhere, fusion dishes often come out rather bland, but the intriguing combinations at Maha Naga spark the imagination.

2 Sukhumvit Soi 29, Klongtoey. ✆ **02662-3060.** www.mahanaga.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 350B–950B ($10–$27/£6.35–£17). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30pm–midnight. 5-min. walk from Phrom Pong BTS station.

Moderate

Kuppa ★ INTERNATIONAL This cafe-restaurant in a quiet neighborhood is worth a visit if only to see the space, a former warehouse (and reputedly a CIA hangout). Now its chic, modern interior houses the offices of owner and interior designer Robin Lourvanij, who shares her time and heart between Bangkok and Australia. Come for the coffee, and don't miss the hulking roaster machine, a centerpiece of the dining area where Kuppa roasts its own blend weekly. The food is delicious: a healthy sampling of Thai and Western fare with good stuff to fill the homesick tummies of expats and visitors. Grilled items are great, there are lots of weekly specials, and guest chefs from Australia make periodic visits. Dessert is something sinful with good coffee.

39 Sukhumvit Soi 16, Klongtoey (a 10-min. walk down Soi 16). ✆ **02663-0495.** Main courses 165B–695B ($4.70–$20/£3–£13). AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun 10:30am–10:30pm. Asok BTS station.

Lemongrass ★★ THAI Nouvelle Thai cuisine tailored to Western tastes is the specialty of this pleasant restaurant. Just a short walk from the skytrain (near Phrom Pong) and right across from the hulking Emporium shopping center, Lemongrass is set in a

Tips Anyone for Crickets?

Grasshoppers, beetles that look like cockroaches, scorpions, ants, and grubs are a favorite snack for folks from Isan, in the northeast, where bugs are cultivated for the dining table and are an important source of protein. Don't miss the snack stands selling these on Sukhumvit or Khao San. How do they taste? Crickets are like popcorn, and the beetles are something like—hate to say it—crispy chicken.

small Thai mansion handsomely conv erted and furnished with antiques. A visit her e makes it easy to forget busy B angkok outside. Try house fav orites such as pomelo salad or chicken satay. Also excellent are the *tom yang kung* (a spicy-and-sour prawn soup with galangal) and the tender, juicy lemon-grass chicken.

5/1 Sukhumvit Soi 24 (south of Suk humvit Rd. on S oi 24). ✆ **02258-8637.** Reservations highly recommended. M ain c ourses 200B–480B ($5.70–$14/£3.60–£8.70). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm. Phrom Pong BTS station.

L'Opera ★ ITALIAN With its sister restaurant in Vientiane, Laos, L'Opera Bangkok has been hosting visitors and expats since it first opened in the 1970s—back when S oi 39 was but a dusty little alley with co ws grazing out fr ont. N ow it's a sophisticated enclave and it's got the formula just right: dim lights in a glassed-in pavilion; cool jazz; and good, affor dable I talian food. Come with friends and fill the table. S tart with a decadent seafood salad. F or a main course, go for the fr esh fish done as y ou like or any of the grilled items or fine pastas.

53/1 Sukhumvit Soi 39, Klongtoey. ✆ **02258-5606.** Main courses 200B–900B ($5.70–$25/£3.60–£16). AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6–10:30pm. 15-min. walk or 30B (85¢/55p) tuk-tuk ride from Phrom Pong BTS station.

Inexpensive

Cabbages & C ondoms ★★ THAI Here's a theme r estaurant with a purpose. Opened b y local her o M echai Viravaidya, founder of the P opulation & Community Development Association, the r estaurant helps fund population contr ol, AIDS awar eness, and a host of r ural development programs. Set in a large compound, the two-stor y restaurant has air-conditioned indoor dining, but if y ou sit on the gar den terrace, you'll be in a fairyland of twinkling lights—quite romantic. Share a whole fish done as you like or, for something on the sweet side, try the *gaang kua goong sapparot* (a sweet curry with shrimp and pineapple). There's also a large selection of v egetable and bean-curd entrees. Before you leave, be sure to check out the gift shop's whimsical condom-related merchandise. The restaurant hands out condoms instead of dinner mints.

10 Sukhumvit S oi 12. ✆ **02229-4610.** Reser vations r ecommended. M ain c ourses 100B–450B ($2.85–$13/£1.80–£8.20). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm. 15-min. walk fr om Asok BTS station.

Crepes & C o. ★★ Kids EUR OPEAN Popular among B angkok for eign r esidents (and their kids), this is the place to satisfy that sw eet tooth, though the savory crepes are yummy, too. Crepes & Co. serves them light and fluffy and filled with any of doz ens of combinations—all of them delicious. It also has good Mediterranean main courses, great coffee, and a nice selection of tea. E verything is ex cellent, and ther e's a choice of eating in the garden, lounge, or dining r oom.

18/1 Sukhumvit Soi 12. ✆ **02653-3990.** www.crepes.co.th. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150B–560B ($4.30–$16/£2.70–£10). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 9am–midnight (Sun from 8am). 15-min. walk from Asok BTS station.

Vientiane Kitchen ★ LAOTIAN The cuisine of Laos is the same as that of Isan, or northeastern Thailand, with sticky rice, grilled chicken, *som tam* (spicy green papaya salad), and *larb* (spicy ground pork salad) being a few of the most popular dishes. Isan food is generally very spicy, and there is plenty of scope for adventurous eaters to sample something out of the ordinary here, such as snails or red ants' eggs in a spicy salad. The place is large and barnlike, the decor is very simple (thatched roofs and bamboo chairs), and the clientele is an eclectic mix of Thais and foreigners. Most evenings there is entertainment in the form of *mor lam* music (a very rhythmic style from Isan and Laos) with accompanying dancers, and they will arrange a special blessing ceremony for anyone celebrating their birthday.

8 Sukhumvit Soi 36 (a 3-min. walk west from Thong Lo skytrain then 50m/164 ft. south down Soi 36). ✆ **02258-6171.** Main courses 150B–220B ($4.30–$6.30/£2.70–£4). AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

When Rama I established Bangkok as the new capital city in the 1780s, he built a new palace and royal temple on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. The city sprang up around the palace and spread outward from this point as population and wealth grew. Today, this area contains most of Bangkok's major historic sights, including a great number of ***wats,*** or Buddhist temples, that were built during the last 200 years. If you're short on time, the most interesting and easily accessible wats to catch are Wat Phra Kaeo, the royal *wat* that houses the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace, and Wat Po, home of the reclining Buddha.

Bangkok's Waterways

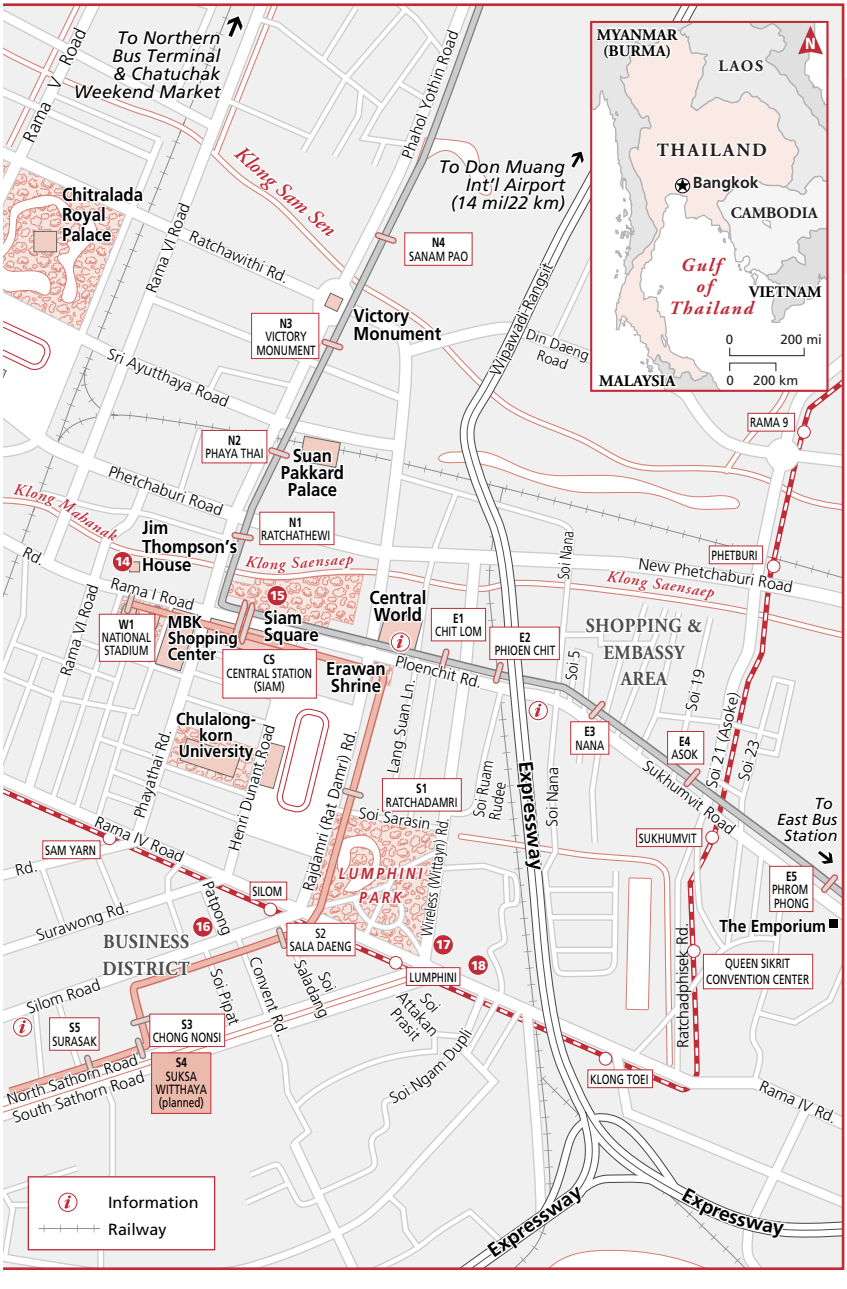
The history of Bangkok was written on its waterways, and Bangkok was once known as the "Venice of the East." Most of these *klongs* have been paved over, but the magnificent Chao Phraya River (River of Kings) cuts through the heart of the city. On the Thonburi side (opposite Bangkok), the labyrinthine canals offer an intimate glimpse of traditional Thai life. You'll see people using the river to bathe and wash their clothes; floating kitchens in sampans serve rice and noodles to customers in other boats. Hire a private boat to see the busy riverside area and to tour the narrow canals of neighboring Thonburi. Boat charter is available at most of the riverside piers, but it is easiest to arrange hourly trips at the riverfront kiosk near the **River City** shopping mall, at the **Grand Palace** (✆ **02225-6179**), or at the skytrain exit at the **Saphan Taksin BTS station.** Trips cost about 1,000B ($29/£18) per hour, per boat (one to six persons). Be specific about destinations and times.

Historic Treasures

Grand Palace ★★★ Rama I built the oldest buildings in the square-mile complex when he moved the capital from Thonburi to Bangkok in the 1780s. It was the official residence and housed the offices of the kings until 1946, when the royal family moved to Chitralada Palace. These days, the palace is used only for royal ceremonies. The focal point of the compound is the Chakri Maha Prasad, an intriguing mixture of Victorian architecture topped with a Thai temple-style roof that today houses the ashes of royal family members. The Amarinda Vinichai Hall is the venue for the highest royal ceremonies,

Grand Palace **7**
Jim Thompson's House **14**
Lumphini Stadium **18**
National Museum **5**
Patpong Night Market **16**
Ratchadamnoen Stadium **3**
Siam Paragon and Ocean World **15**
Suan Lum Night Bazaar **17**
TAT Office (Tourist Authority of Thailand) **4**
Vimanmek Mansion Museum **1**
Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) **9**
Wat Benchamabophit (Marble Temple) **2**
Wat Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic) **6**
Wat Phra Kaeo **8**
Wat Po (Temple of the Reclining Buddha) **10**
Wat Saket (Golden Mount) **12**
Wat Suthat and the Giant Swing **11**
Wat Traimit (Golden Buddha) **13**

MRTA Subway
Skytrain:
Sukhumvit Line
Silom Line


To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
Rama V Road
Klong Sam Sen
Phahol Yothin Road
To Don Muang Int'l Airport (14 mi/22 km)
Chitralada Royal Palace
Rama VI Road
Ratchawithi Rd.
N4 SANAM PAO
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
Victory Monument
Wipawadi-Rangsit
Din Daeng Road
Sri Ayutthaya Road
N2 PHAYA THAI
Suan Pakkard Palace
Phetchaburi Road
Klong Mahanak
Rd.
Jim Thompson's House
14
N1 RATCHATHEWI
Klong Saensaep
Rama I Road
Rama VI Road
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
MBK Shopping Center
15
Siam Square
CS CENTRAL STATION (SIAM)
Central World
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHROM PHONG
Soi Nana
PHETBURI
New Phetchaburi Road
Klong Saensaep
SHOPPING & EMBASSY AREA
Soi 5
Soi 19
Soi 21 (Asoke)
Soi 23
Erawan Shrine
Ploenchit Rd.
Chulalongkorn University
Henri Dunant Road
Phayathai Rd.
Lang Suan Ln.
E3 NANA
E4 ASOK
Sukhumvit Road
Raidamri (Rat Damri) Rd.
S1 RATCHADAMRI
Soi Sarasin
Soi Ruam Rudee
Soi Nana
Expressway
To East Bus Station
SUKHUMVIT
SAM YARN
Rama IV Road
Rd.
LUMPHINI PARK
Patpong
SILOM
Surawong Rd.
16
17
18
S2 SALA DAENG
Wireless (Witthayu) Rd.
E5 PHROM PHONG
The Emporium
BUSINESS DISTRICT
Soi Pipat
Convent Rd.
Soi Saladaeng
LUMPHINI
Soi Attakan Prasit
Silom Road
S5 SURASAK
S3 CHONG NONSI
S4 SUKSA WITTHAYA (planned)
North Sathorn Road
South Sathorn Road
Ratchadhisek Rd.
QUEEN SIKRIT CONVENTION CENTER
KLONG TOEI
Soi Ngam Duplee
Rama IV Rd.
Expressway
Expressway
Information
Railway
MYANMAR (BURMA)
LAOS
THAILAND
Bangkok
CAMBODIA
Gulf of Thailand
VIETNAM
0 200 mi
0 200 km
MALAYSIA
RAMA 9

including coronations. The Dusit Hall is a perfect example of Thai architecture of the highest order.

Near the river on Na Phra Lan Rd., near Sanam Luang. ✆ **02224-1833.** Admission 300B ($8.55/£5.45). Price includes Wat Phra Kaeo and the Coin Pavilion inside the Grand Palace grounds, as well as admission to the Vimanmek Palace (near the National Assembly). Daily 8:30am–3:30pm; most individual buildings are closed to the public except on special days proclaimed by the king. Take the Chao Phraya Express Boat to the Tha Chang Pier, then walk east and south.

Jim Thompson's House ★ Jim Thompson was a New York architect who served in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services, now the CIA) in Thailand during World War II and afterward settled in Bangkok. He almost single-handedly revived Thailand's silk industry, employing Thai Muslims as skilled silk weavers and building up a thriving industry. After expanding his sales to international markets, Thompson mysteriously disappeared in 1967 while vacationing in the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia. Despite extensive investigation, his disappearance has never been resolved.

His Thai house is composed of six teakwood houses from central Thailand that were rebuilt according to Thai architectural principles, but with Western additions (such as a staircase and window screens). In some rooms, the floor is made of Italian marble, but the wall panels are pegged teak. Visitors must join a guided tour through rooms filled with Thompson's splendid collection of Khmer sculpture, Chinese porcelain, Burmese carving (especially a 17th-c. teak Buddha), and antique Thai scroll paintings.

Soi Kasemsan 2 (on a small *soi* off Rama I Rd., opposite the National Stadium). ✆ **02216-7368.** Admission 100B ($2.85/£1.80). Daily 9am–5:30pm.

National Museum ★★ The National Museum, a short (15-min.) walk north of the Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, is the country's central treasury of art and archaeology. It was originally the palace that the brother of Rama I built as part of the Grand Palace complex in 1782. Rama V converted the palace into a museum in 1884. Today, it is the largest museum in Southeast Asia and takes quite a lot of time to see.

One important stop is the Red House, a traditional 18th-century Thai building that was originally the living quarters of Princess Sri Sudarak. Another essential stop is the Phuttaisawan (Buddhaisawan) Chapel, built in 1787 to house the Phra Phut Sihing, one of Thailand's most revered Buddha images, brought here from its original home in Chiang Mai. The main building of the royal palace contains gold jewelry, some from the royal collections, and Thai ceramics, including many pieces in the five-color *bencharong* style. The Old Transportation Room has ivory carvings, elephant chairs, and royal palanquins. There are also rooms of royal emblems and insignia, stone carvings, woodcarvings, costumes, textiles, musical instruments, and Buddhist religious artifacts. Fine art and sculpture are found in the newer galleries at the rear of the museum compound.

Na Phra That Rd. (about 1km/½ mile north of the Grand Palace). ✆ **02224-1333.** Admission 40B ($1.15/70p). Wed–Sun 9am–4pm. Free English-language tours: Buddhism/culture Wed 9:30am, art/culture/religion Thurs 9:30am; call the museum or check a newspaper for more details and current schedule.

Vimanmek Mansion Museum ★ Built in 1901 by King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V) as the Celestial Residence, this beautiful golden-teakwood mansion was restored in 1982 for Bangkok's bicentennial and was reopened by Queen Sirikit as a private museum with a collection of the royal family's memorabilia. An intriguing and informative 1-hour tour takes you through a series of apartments and rooms (of which there are 81 in all) in what is said to be the largest teak building in the world—the thought of all that gorgeous teakwood is staggering. The original **Abhisek Dusit Throne**

Hall houses a display of Thai handicrafts, and nine other buildings north of the mansion display photographs, clocks, fabrics, royal carriages, and other regalia.

193/2 Ratchavitee Rd., Dusit Palace grounds (opposite the Dusit Zoo, north of the National Assembly Building). ✆ **02628-6300-9.** www.vimanmek.com. Admission 100B ($2.85/£1.80); included in Grand Palace fee. Daily 9am–4pm (ticket office closes 3:15pm).

Bangkok's Temples

Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) ★★★ The 86m-high (282-ft.) Khmer-inspired tower rises majestically from the banks of the Chao Phraya, across from Wat Po. This religious complex served as the royal chapel during King Taksin's reign (1868–82), when Thonburi was the capital of Thailand. The original tower was only 16m (52 ft.) high, but it was expanded during the rule of Rama III (1824–51) to its current height. The exterior is decorated with floral and decorative motifs made of colorful ceramic shards, which were donated to the monastery by local people at the request of Rama III. Wat Arun is a sight to behold shimmering in the sunrise, but the best time to view it is in late afternoon for sunset, when the main tower makes a striking silhouette.

West bank of the Chao Phraya, opposite Tha Thien Pier. www.watarun.org. Admission 50B ($1.40/90p). Daily 8am–5:30pm. Take a river taxi from Tha Thien (near Wat Po) or cross the Phra Pinklao Bridge and follow the river south on Arun Amarin Rd.

Wat Benchamabophit (Marble Temple) Wat Benchamabophit, simplified for tourists as the Marble Temple because of the white Carrara marble from which it's constructed, is an early-20th-century temple designed by Prince Narai, the half brother of Rama V. It's the most modern and one of the most beautiful of Bangkok's royal *wats.* Unlike the older complexes, there's no truly monumental *wihaan* or *chedi* dominating the grounds. Many smaller buildings reflect a melding of European materials and designs with traditional Thai religious architecture. Even the courtyards are paved with polished white marble. Walk inside the compound, beyond the main *bot,* to view the many Buddha images that represent various aspects of regional styles. In the early mornings, monks chant in the main chapel, sometimes so intensely that it seems as if the temple is going to lift off.

Si Ayutthaya Rd. (south of the Assembly Bldg. near Chitralada Palace). Admission 20B (60¢/35p). Daily 8am–5:30pm.

Wat Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic) ★ Built to house a relic of the Buddha, Wat Mahathat is one of Bangkok's oldest shrines and the headquarters for Thailand's largest monastic order. Also the home of the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, the most important center for the study of Buddhism and meditation, Wat Mahathat offers some programs in English (call for details).

Adjacent to it, between Maharat Road and the river, is the city's biggest **amulet market,** where a fantastic array of religious amulets, charms, talismans, and traditional medicine is sold. Every day, believers in their powers squat on the ground studying tiny images of the Buddha with magnifying glasses, hoping to find one that will bring good fortune or ward off evil.

Na Phra That Rd. (near Sanam Luang Park, btw. the Grand Palace and the National Museum). ✆ **02222-6011.** Suggested donation 20B (60¢/35p). Daily 9am–5pm.

Wat Phra Kaeo ★★★ When Rama I built the Grand Palace, he included this temple, the royal temple most revered by the Thai people. The famed **Emerald Buddha,** a .6m-tall (2-ft.) northern Thai-style image made from green jasper, sits atop a towering gold altar. The statue dons a different costume for each of the three seasons in Thailand,

changed by the king himself, who climbs up to the image because it can be lowered for no one.

Historians believe that artists created the statue in the 14th century. The Emerald Buddha hid inside a plaster Buddha image until 1434, when movers accidentally dropped it, setting it free. The king at Chiang Mai demanded that it be brought to his city, but three attempts failed. Each time, the elephant transporting the image stopped at the same spot in Lampang, so the king gave in to the will of the spirits and built a *chedi* (sacred monument) for it there. Thirty-two years later, King Tiloka of Chiang Mai brought the image to Chiang Mai. The Emerald Buddha stayed in the Wat Chedi Luang until 1552, when a later king from Luang Prabang carted it off to Laos. When the king moved the capital of Laos to Vientiane, the image followed him. Rama I finally recaptured the statue in a successful invasion of Laos and placed it in Wat Phra Kaeo, where it remains today.

The *wat* compound is a small city in itself, including a library with stunning Ayutthaya-style mother-of-pearl inlay doors; a reliquary like a golden bell-shaped Sri Lankan–style *chedi;* a *wihaan* (hall) bejeweled with chipped porcelain mosaics; and a miniature model of Angkor Wat, the sprawling temple complex at the ancient Khmer capital, with its corncob-shape *chedis.* Murals on the surrounding walls tell the story of the *Ramayana* (one of the two great epics of India).

In the Grand Palace complex. ✆ **02222-0094.** Admission 300B ($8.60/£5.45); included in Grand Palace fee. Daily 8:30am–3:30pm. Take the Chao Phraya Express Boat to Tha Chang Pier, then walk east and south.

Wat Po (Temple of the Reclining Buddha) ★★★ Wat Po (Wat Phra Chetuphon) was built by Rama I in the 16th century and is the oldest and largest Buddhist temple in Bangkok. Considered Thailand's first public university, the temple's many monuments and artworks explain principles of religion, science, and literature.

Most people go straight to the enormous Reclining Buddha in the northern section. It's more than 46m (151 ft.) long and 16m (53 ft.) high, and was built during the mid-19th-century reign of Rama III. The statue is brick, covered with layers of plaster and always-flaking gold leaf; the feet are inlaid with mother-of-pearl illustrations of 108 auspicious *laksanas* (characteristics) of the Buddha. Behind the Buddha, a line of 108 bronze bowls, each also representing one of the *laksanas,* awaits visitors to drop coins (acquired nearby for a 20B/55¢/35p donation for luck).

Outside, the grounds contain 91 *chedis* (stupas or sacred mounds), four *wihaans,* and a *bot* (the central shrine in a Buddhist temple). The Traditional Medical Practitioners Association Center teaches traditional Thai massage and medicine. Stop in for a massage (250B/$7.15/£4.55 per hour) or ask about the 7- to 10-day massage courses.

Maharat Rd., near the river (about 1km/½ mile south of the Grand Palace). ✆ **02225-9595,** or 02221-2974 (massage school). Admission 50B ($1.40/90p). Daily 8am–5pm; massages offered until 6pm.

Wat Saket (Golden Mount) ★ Wat Saket is easily recognized by its golden *chedi* atop a forresslike hill near the pier for Bangkok's east-west *klong* ferry. The *wat* was restored by King Rama I, and 30,000 bodies were brought here during a plague in the reign of Rama II. The hill, which is almost 80m (262 ft.) high, is an artificial construction begun during the reign of Rama III. Rama IV brought in 1,000 teak logs to shore it up because it was sinking into the swampy ground. Rama V built the golden *chedi* to house a relic of Buddha, said to be from India or Nepal, given to him by the British. The concrete walls were added during World War II to keep the structure from collapsing.

The Golden Mount, a short but breathtaking climb that's best made in the morning, is most interesting for its vista of old Rattanakosin Island and the rooftops of Bangkok. Every late October to mid-November (for 9 days around the full moon), Wat Saket hosts Bangkok's most important temple fair, when the Golden Mount is wrapped with red cloth and a carnival erupts around it, with food and trinket stalls, theatrical performances, freak shows, animal circuses, and other monkey business.

Ratchadamnoen Klang and Boripihat roads. Admission 10B (30¢/20p). Daily 9am–5pm.

Wat Suthat and the Giant Swing The temple is among the oldest and largest in Bangkok, and Somerset Maugham declared its roofline the most beautiful. It was begun by Rama I and finished by Rama III; Rama II carved the panels for the *wihaan*'s doors. It houses a beautiful 14th-century Phra Buddha Shakyamuni that was brought from Sukhothai, and the ashes of King Rama VIII, Ananda Mahidol, brother of the current king, are contained in its base. The wall paintings for which it is known were done during Rama III's reign.

The huge arch in front—also carved by Rama II—is all that remains of an original giant swing, which was used until 1932 to celebrate and thank Shiva for a bountiful rice harvest and to ask for the god's blessing on the next. The minister of rice, accompanied by hundreds of Brahman court astrologers, would lead a parade around the city walls to the temple precinct. Teams of men would ride the swing on arcs as high as 25m (82 ft.) in the air, trying to grab a bag of silver coins with their teeth. Due to injuries and deaths, the dangerous swing ceremony has been discontinued.

Sao Chingcha Sq. (near the intersection of Bamrung Muang and Ti Thong roads). Suggested donation 20B (60¢/35p). Daily 9am–9pm.

Wat Traimit (Golden Buddha) Thirteenth-century Wat Traimit is notable only for its central statue, a nearly 3m-high (10-ft.), 5-ton Buddha in solid gold. The statue was discovered by accident in 1957 when an old stucco image was being moved from a storeroom by a crane, which dropped it and shattered the plaster shell, revealing the shining gold beneath. The graceful seated statue was cast during the Sukhothai period and later covered with plaster to hide it from the Burmese.

Traimit Rd. (west of Hua Lampong Railway Station, just west of the intersection of Krung Kasem and Rama IV roads). Suggested donation 20B (60¢/35p). Daily 9am–5pm. Walk southwest on Traimit Rd. and look for a school on the right with a playground; the wat is up a flight of stairs overlooking the school.

Cultural Pursuits

Thai culture is not something to observe but to participate in, and festivals, classes, and cultural activities abound. Check with the **TAT** (✆ **02250-5500**) or the **Bangkok Tourist Division** (✆ **02225-7612,** or visit the information offices around the city), and keep an eye on magazines such as *BK Magazine* or local newspapers including the *Nation* and the *Bangkok Post* for major events during your stay.

THAI COOKING Fancy a chance to learn cooking techniques from the pros? Thai cooking is fun and easy, and there are a few good hands-on courses in Bangkok. Learn about Thai herbs, spices, and unusual local veggies (you'll never look at a produce market the same way again). Lectures on Thai regional cuisine, cooking techniques, and menu planning complement classroom exercises to prepare all your favorite dishes. The best part is afterward, when you get to eat them. The **Blue Elephant** (✆ **02673-9353;** www.blueelephant.com) is one of the best in town, with classes starting at 2,800B ($80/£51).

THAI MASSAGE ★★★ A traditional Thai massage is a must-do for visitors. You don't just lie back and passively receive a Thai massage; instead, you are an active participant as masseuses manipulate your limbs to stretch each muscle, then apply acupressure techniques to loosen up tense muscles and get energy flowing. It's been described as having yoga "done" to you—your body will be twisted, pulled, and sometimes pounded in the process.

The home of Thai massage, **Wat Po,** is school to almost every masseuse in Bangkok and offers massages in an open-air pavilion within the temple complex—a very interesting, though not always relaxing, experience (see "Bangkok's Temples," above; ✆ **02225-9595;** 250B/$7.15/£4.55 per hour).

Bangkok supports some fine spas; most are in the larger hotels, though there are several day spas, too. **Le Banyan Tree Spa** (✆ **02679-1052-4;** www.banyantreespa.com and the **Shangri-La Hotel's Chi Spa** (✆ **02236-7777;** www.shangri-la.com) are among the best places, but they're just two of the many excellent spas in town.

There are countless massage places around Bangkok, many offering proficient services at very reasonable rates (around 200B/$5.70/£3.60 per hour). Places that offer "ancient" or "traditional" Thai massage generally have well-trained masseurs and masseuses who offer no extras, but if you are asked to pick a number from a group of dolled-up masseuses sitting behind a glass barrier, you can be sure the term "massage" is a euphemism for paid sex. Your chosen masseuse will then inform you of the "extras" available and the going rates.

THAI BOXING ★★ ***Muaythai,*** or Thai boxing, is Thailand's national sport. A visit to the two venues in Bangkok, or to the many fight-nights in towns all over Thailand (as much festival as sport), is a fun window into Thai culture. The pageant of the fighters' elegant pre-bout rituals, live musical performances, and frenetic gambling activity are a real spectacle. In Bangkok, catch up to 15 bouts nightly at either of two stadiums. The air-conditioned **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (Ratchadamnoen Nok Ave.; ✆ **02281-4205**) hosts fights on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday, while the muggier **Lumphini Stadium** (Rama IV Rd.; ✆ **02251-4303**) has bouts on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday. Tickets are 2,000B ($57/£36) for ringside seats, 1,500B ($43/£27) for second-class seats, and 1,000B ($29/£18) for nosebleed seats. Go for second-class seats. Not for the squeamish.

MEDITATION **Wat Mahathat,** or the Temple of the Great Relic (see "Bangkok's Temples," above), serves as one of Thailand's largest Buddhist universities and has become a popular center for meditation lessons and practice, with English-speaking monks overseeing students of Vipassana, or Insight Meditation. Three-hour sessions begin daily at 7am, 1pm, and 6pm (✆ **02222-6011**). Donations are requested.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Most hotels, certainly the finest five-star properties, support quality fitness centers complete with personal trainers and top equipment. **California Wow,** just along Silom Road near Patpong at Liberty Square (✆ **02631-1122**), is a large, convenient facility open to day visitors.

GOLF Golf enthusiasts will be happy to know that you don't have to go far to enjoy some of Thailand's best courses; there are a number of courses, some of championship quality, in or near the city center.

- **Pinehurst Golf & Country Club,** 73 Phaholyothin Rd., Klong Luang, Pathum Thani (✆ **02516-8679;** www.pinehurst.co.th), sports three 9-hole courses at par 27

each. This prestigious club served as the venue for the 1992 Johnnie Walker Classic (greens fees: 1,800B/$51/£33 weekdays, 2,400B/$69/£44 weekends).

- **Thana City Golf & Country Club,** 100-100/1 Moo 4, Bangna-Trad Road, Samut Prakan (✆ **02336-1968**), a challenging par-72 course designed by Greg Norman, has a seaside feel to it with lots of streams, lakes and sand traps (greens fees: 1,620B/$46/£29 weekdays, 2,300B/$66/£42 weekends).
- **Green Valley Country Club,** 92 Moo 3 Bangna-Trad Road, Samut Prakan (✆ **02501-2828**), is one of the most convenient courses for Bangkok and has some testing fair ways and greens. It also has the option of night golf (greens fees: 1,600B/$46/£29 weekdays, 2,400B/$69/£44 weekends).

SHOPPING

You're bound to shop in Bangkok. With the abundance of Thai silk, good tailors, art-work, hill-tribe crafts, silver, gems, and porcelain, shopping is inevitable, but prices are low and the whole process is good fun—bargain hard. At the city's many **street bazaars,** you can find cheap batik clothing, knockoff watches, jeans, designer wear, and all sorts of souvenirs. Buy a bag to tote it all back home.

The best hotel shopping arcades are those at the **Oriental,** the **Four Seasons,** and the **Peninsula** hotels; prices are high. For Thai silk, try the **Jim Thompson Thai Silk Company,** the town's most famous (main store: 9 Surawong Rd., near Silom; ✆ **02632-8100;** www.jimthompson.com).

Pick up a copy of Nancy Chandler's *The Market Map* (250B/$7.15/£4.55), with detailed insets of specific shopping areas. If you encounter problems with merchants, call the tourist police (✆ **1155**).

Shopping Areas

ALONG THE RIVER One of the finest collections of art and antiques dealers anywhere in the kingdom is at **River City,** a large convention hall at the riverside near Bangkok's finest hotels. Sticker shock is the rule, but you get what you pay for—and quality is what you get here. Nearby **Charoen Krung Road** hosts lots of high-end shopping venues for everything from jewelry and antiques to carpets and fine tailoring. All shops can arrange shipping.

SUKHUMVIT ROAD This area is lined with shops from one end to the other, as well as some of Bangkok's biggest shopping malls (see "Department Stores & Shopping Malls," below). For antiques, stop in **L'Arcadia** (12/2 Sukhumvit Soi 23; ✆ **02259-1517**), where you'll find fine Burmese and Thai furniture and carvings. For gems, try **Uthai's Gems** (28/7 Soi Ruam Rudee; ✆ **02253-8582**), down Ruam Rudee, a busy shortcut *soi* parallel to Wireless just south of Ploen Chit.

SILOM ROAD This area is packed with outdoor shopping (see the **Patpong Night Market,** discussed below). There are numerous fine jewelry shops, silk retailers, and tailors here.

Warning! Jewelry Scams

For every reputable gem dealer in Bangkok, there are at least 100 crooks waiting to catch you in the latest scam. To avoid being ripped off, follow this simple rule: Refuse offers from touts for free city shopping junkets.

Markets

Visiting Bangkok's many markets is as much a cultural as a consumer experience: The markets are where the Thai economy happens. Bargaining is fast and furious. The **Weekend Market (Chatuchak),** near the Mo Chit BTS stop, is the city's most famous, covering a vast area and overcrowded on any given Saturday or Sunday. The riverside **Chinatown** area is a labyrinth of shopping. **Khao San Road,** the popular backpacker area, is a great place to pick up anything from travel trinkets to cool T-shirts. The city's two night markets, **Patpong Night Market** (Patpong Soi 1, off Silom) and **Suan Lum Night Market** (east of Lumpini Park on Rama IV Rd.), are great stops for souvenirs and more. The latter has been under threat of closure for a few years, but at the time of writing was still operating.

Department Stores & Shopping Malls

The size and opulence of Bangkok's many malls and shopping plazas are a shock to first-time visitors in search of the exotic. Highlights include the cavernous **Siam Paragon** (99/1 Rama I Rd., opposite the Siam BTS stop; ✆ **02610-8000;** www.siamparagon.co.th), one of the largest malls in Asia, with designer outlets, a gourmet market and food court offering everything from fast food to fine dining, an IMAX theater, a bowling alley, and even an opera theater. Paragon's **Siam Ocean World** ★★ (✆ **02687-2000;** www.siamoceanworld.com) deserves special mention—it's a world-class aquarium with a large shark tank that you can walk through via glass tunnel. Great for both kids and adults. Open daily from 9am to 10pm; admission is 850B ($24/£15) for adults, 650B ($19/£12) for children.

Next door are the sister shopping malls of **Siam Center** and **Siam Discovery Center** (Rama I Rd.; ✆ **02658-1000**), both offering additional acres of high-end shopping.

Also near Siam, the **MBK Center** (at Rama I and Phayathai roads; National Stadium BTS station; ✆ **02620-9000;** www.mbk-center.co.th) and its **Tokyu Department Store** are a real trip to teeny-bopper Thailand. This mall houses thousands of affordable local shops, making it a cross between a street market and a shopping mall.

The new darling of Bangkok's shopaholics is **Central World** (at Ratchadamri and Rama I roads; ✆ **02635-1111;** www.centralworld.co.th), currently the biggest shopping complex in Southeast Asia with more than half a million square meters of retail space and parking for more than 7,000 cars. The complex includes 50 restaurants, 21 cinemas, a bowling alley, and a kids' zone.

BANGKOK AFTER DARK

Despite legislation restricting bar hours, the action is still fierce and furious in Thailand's hedonistic capital, and a rollicking good time can always be found. If the Bangkok debauch isn't your scene, know that the town is not all red-light district by any means: There are all kinds of events, clubs, and bars. Check *BK Magazine,* the *Bangkok Post,* or the *Nation* for current happenings.

The Performing Arts

There are a number of Thai dance and dinner theaters for tourists (see "Dinner & Dance," p. 93, for specific recommendations).

There are two major theaters for Thai and international performances: the **National Theater** (1 Na Phra That Rd.; ✆ **02224-1342**) and the **Thailand Cultural Center** (Thiem Ruammit Rd. off Ratchadaphisek Rd., Huai Khwang; ✆ **02247-0028**), both with a regular schedule of performances. Contact them directly or check local papers.

The **Joe Louis Theater** (in the Suan Lum Night Market adjacent to Lumpini Park; ✆ **02252-9683;** www.thaipuppet.com) holds nightly **puppet theater** performances of stories from the *Ramakien* as well as comic vignettes of rural Thai life. Shows are nightly at 7:30 and 8:45pm. Tickets start at 900B ($26/£16).

The Bar & Club Scene

There are nighttime adventures to be found down any *soi* in town. If you'd like to unwind with an evening cocktail, check out what's happening at your hotel's lobby bar; many set up jazzy live music to entertain folks. Stop by the **Bamboo Bar,** at the Oriental (Oriental Lane off Charoen Krung Rd.; ✆ **02236-0400**), or the **Living Room,** at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit (250 Sukhumvit Rd.; ✆ **02649-8888**). Both present some of the best jazz in the city; the Living Room also hosts a weekly Sunday Jazzy Brunch Buffet from 11:30am to 3pm.

SILOM ROAD & PATPONG Most visitors won't leave Bangkok without a stroll around Patpong, the famous strip of go-go bars and night market with myriad vendors and blocks of bars and clubs. The Patpong scene centers Soi Patpong 1 and Soi Patpong 2 between Surawong and Silom roads. It's the home of Bangkok's raunchier sex shows (mostly in the upstairs bars, which are infamous for scams so are best avoided), but most visitors come to wander the market area (lots of pirated goods).

Despite its rep as a go-go center, there are lots of good bars in Patpong. **O'Reilly's Irish Pub** (62 Silom Rd., at corner of Soi Thaniya just east of Patpong; ✆ **02632-7515**) is a lively bar full of locals and travelers, and features nightly drink specials. The **Barbican** (9/4–5 Soi Thaniya off Silom Rd.; ✆ **02234-3590**) is a stylish hangout with great food and live music. The **Irish Exchange,** across from Patpong on Convent Road (next to Silom Complex at 1/5–6 Sivadon Bldg.; ✆ **02266-7160**), caters to expats with live music after office working hours. If you crave margaritas, **Coyote on Convent** (1/2 Convent Rd.; ✆ **02631-2325**) has 75 varieties to choose from.

Head to Silom Soi 4 (btw. Patpong 2 and Soi Thaniya off Silom Rd.), where you'll find small homegrown clubs spinning great music as well as the city's prominent gay clubs: **Telephone Bar** (114/11–13 Silom Soi 4; ✆ **02234-3279**) and the **Balcony** (86–8 Silom Soi 4; ✆ **02235-5891**).

SIAM SQUARE Siam Square, on Rama I Road between Henri Dunant and Phayathai roads, is where you'll find Bangkok's **Hard Rock Cafe** (424/3–6 Siam Sq. Soi 11; ✆ **02251-0797**), featuring good live bands.

A great disco, **Concept CM²,** has nightly live or DJ music—a very popular place in the basement of the Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square (Siam Sq. Soi 6; ✆ **02209-8888**). **Spasso,** in the Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok (494 Ratchadamri Rd.; ✆ **02254-6308**), is a great Italian restaurant that turns into an upscale club with live music acts nightly.

A little bit north of this area (a short taxi ride away), near the Victory Monument BTS station (a cab ride up Phayathai Rd.), check out live jazz and blues at **Saxophone Pub and Restaurant** (✆ **02246-5472**).

KHAO SAN ROAD The backpackers on Khao San Road still party on despite restrictions on opening hours. Start at **Gulliver's,** on the corner of Khao San and Chakrabongse roads, and then explore the back lanes off Khao San for small dance clubs (some the size of broom closets) and hangouts. You'll find lots of travelers in their 20s and a perpetually laid-back atmosphere—anything goes. In the middle of Khao San, don't miss **Lava** (249 Khao San Rd.; ✆ **02281-6565**), a popular basement dance club. For a mellower evening, head west of Khao San to riverside **Phra Athit Road,** where there are a number of small cafes with live music.

 One of the most happening areas of Bangkok, the small *sois* along busy Sukhumvit host Bangkok's top clubs and good bars. **Q Bar** ★★ (34 Sukhumvit Soi 11; ✆ **02252-3274**) is *the* place for the slick urban hip of Bangkok; its only rival is the similarly ab-fab **Bed Supperclub** ★★★ (p. 92; 26 Sukhumvit Soi 11; ✆ **02651-3537**). Both are ultramodern, have great expat DJs, and boom-boom-boom late into the night 7 days a week.

The **Conrad Hotel** (87 Wireless Rd., across from the U.S. Embassy; ✆ **02690-9999**) is home to two of Bangkok's newest and best spots: **87** is an ultrachic, ultraexclusive club, while the **Diplomat Bar** ★ fills with, well, diplomats from the U.S. Embassy as well as Bangkok's hobnobbers.

For bars along Sukhumvit, try the **Bull's Head** (Sukhumvit Soi 33/1; ✆ **02261-0665**), a fun local pub that draws crowds with frequent theme parties and a clubhouse attitude. The **Londoner Brew Pub** (Sukhumvit Soi 33; ✆ **02261-0238**) is a popular brewpub, while the **Witch's Tavern** (Sukhumvit Soi 55; ✆ **02391-9791**) packs 'em in—especially on weekends—with a range of beers and cocktails, as well as pub grub and live rock music.

If you're in the mood for dancing, **Royal City Avenue (RCA)** is a 2km (1 1/4-mile) stretch of bars, restaurants, and clubs between Rama IX and New Phetchaburi roads. Mostly frequented by young, well-heeled Thais, RCA has clubs spinning everything from trance to American pop. It's always happening on the weekends and is decidedly un-sex-touristy.

The Bangkok Sex Scene

Since the 1960s—and particularly since the Vietnam War—Bangkok has been the sin capital of Asia, with sex clubs, bars, massage parlors, and prostitutes concentrated in the **Patpong, Nana Plaza,** and **Soi Cowboy** districts. Sex is for sale in many quarters of Bangkok, and many first-time visitors are surprised at seeing the many older Western gentlemen strutting about town with lovely young Thai ladies.

Despite efforts by the government to tone down this image by restricting opening hours (most bars now close at midnight or 1am), Bangkok's skin trades are thriving. Go-go bars and clubs are really little more than fronts for prostitution, and very thinly veiled fronts at that. The men and women in the clubs are all available to take out of the bar for a "bar fine." "Modern" or "physical" massage parlors are where patrons choose ladies by number from behind glass for an oil massage and more, with negotiations. If this is your scene, take great care: Apart from the condom thing (use one), prostitutes are known to slip you drugs (which happens), rob your hotel room while you're sleeping (which happens), or get you mixed up with illegal activities (which also happens). Child prostitution, slavery, and violence against sex workers are still common. If you encounter any problem, report it to the tourist police (✆ **1155**).

Note that a startling increase in HIV-positive cases in the last 20 years brought on mandated as well as grass-roots efforts to educate about the use of condoms, which has slowed the rate of increase, though AIDS is still a major concern among sex workers.

On the other hand, if you're looking for something similar to the Patpong sex-show scene, Sukhumvit has a couple of popular go-go areas: **Soi Cowboy** (btw. Soi Asoke and Sukhumvit Soi 21), the oldest go-go scene dating from Vietnam War days; and **Nana Plaza,** just on Sukhumvit Soi 4.

SIDE TRIPS FROM BANGKOK

Easy Day Trips

See "Visitor Information & Tours" (p. 77) for recommended agencies that can make all the arrangements for the following excursions.

The **Muang Boran** (✆ **02709-1644-5;** www.ancientcity.com) ★★, or **Ancient City,** is roughly 45 minutes east of Bangkok in Samut Prakan. Best reached by group tour, Muang Boran is a collection of scaled-down replicas of more than 100 of Thailand's most famous and architecturally significant structures. The grounds housing the models cover 128 hectares (320 acres) in the shape of Thailand, with each structure generally set in its correct location. Open daily 8am from 5pm. Admission is 300B ($8.60/£5.45) for adults, 150B ($4.30/£2.70) for children.

The **Floating Market at Damnoen Saduak** ★, Ratchaburi, is about 40 minutes south of Nakhon Pathom. Some tours combine the Floating Market with a visit to the Rose Garden or with the River Kwai sights (see below for more on each). At a real floating market, food vendors sell their goods from small boats to local folks in other boats or in *klong*-side homes. Damnoen is as precise a duplicate as you could imagine and great for photographers.

Besides its manicured gardens, the attractive if somewhat touristy **Rose Garden** (✆ **03432-2544;** www.rosegardenriverside.com) is known for its all-in-one show of Thai culture, which includes Thai classical and folk dancing, Thai boxing, sword fighting, and cock fighting—a convenient way for visitors with limited time to digest some canned Thai culture. It's 32km (20 miles) west of Bangkok on the way to Nakhon Pathom on Hwy. 4. Admission is 40B ($1.15/70p) for the grounds, 480B ($14/£8.70) for the show. It's open daily from 8am to 5pm; the cultural show is at 2:45pm. Call for details.

Kanchanaburi

120km (74 miles) NW of Bangkok

Really more than a day trip (best as an overnight), Kanchanaburi is home of the famed **Bridge over the River Kwai** and the notorious internment camps for Allied troops forced into servitude (and death) by the Japanese during World War II in an effort to link Burma and Thailand by rail. Made legendary by the film of the same name, the bridge that stands here today is just a little rattle-trap trestle that crosses the River Kwai (but that doesn't stop souvenir hawkers and the tourist infrastructure that has grown up around the bridge). More poignant is the Allied War Cemetery, where the dates on the gravestones set among manicured grounds tell a tragic tale of young lives cut short. There are lots of good excursions in the area, many caves and waterfalls in the surrounding hills, and a few good hotels and riverside guesthouses; it's a popular escape from the heat, traffic, and pollution of Bangkok.

You can connect by train from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334) on regular weekend junkets starting in the early morning, or go by daily ordinary trains from **Thonburi Station** (formerly called Bangkok Noi; ✆ **02411-3102**), with slow, twice-daily connections to **Kanchanaburi Station** (✆ **03456-1052**) for 200B ($5.70/£3.60) round-trip. The rail trips here are quite scenic and a great experience,

though a long, hot ride. There are also frequent regular buses from the **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02894-1622**), but if you're going by road, it's perhaps best to opt for a rented car (see "Getting Around," p. 74).

For overnight lodging, consider the **Felix River Kwai Resort** (9/1 Moo 3 Tambon, Kanchanaburi; ✆ **03455-1033;** www.felixriverkhwai.co.th). The Felix has rooms starting at 2,000B ($57/£36) and is the best for comfort, but places such as the **VN Guesthouse** (44 Rongheeb Oil Rd., Soi 2; ✆ **034-514082;** www.vnguesthouse.net) offer basic rooms from 250B ($7.15/£4.55) on a raft at the riverside, which are certainly far more atmospheric and adventurous. Budget guesthouses on dry land line the banks of the river south of the bridge.

Ayutthaya ★★

76km (47 miles) N of Bangkok

From 1350 until its fall to the Burmese in 1767, Ayutthaya was Thailand's capital and home to 33 kings and numerous dynasties. At its zenith and until the mid–18th century, Ayutthaya was a majestic city with three palaces and 400 splendid temples on an island threaded by canals—a site that impressed European visitors.

The architecture of Ayutthaya is a fascinating mix of Khmer (ancient Cambodian) and early Sukhothai style, with large corncob-shaped obelisks, called *prangs,* the hallmark. The town is encircled by water, and the central island area of Ayutthaya is itself the site; modern buildings and busy canal-side streets are in and among the ruins of this once-great city. It is flat, so going by rented bicycle is a good choice. Highlights are **Wat Mahathat,** a crumbling but stunning example of the Ayutthaya style (don't miss the Buddha head in the tree trunk), and **Wihaan Phra Mongkol Bopit,** which houses a massive Buddha. The **Ayutthaya Historical Study Center** and nearby **Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** offer useful background information. The TAT office at the museum offers a detailed map.

Train and bus connections are frequent from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334) and **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**), respectively.

All-day river cruises are a popular option to and from Ayutthaya. Contact **River Sun Cruises** (✆ **02266-9125;** www.riversuncruise.co.th) directly or book through any riverside hotel; departure points are the **Oriental** (✆ **02659-9000**), the **Shangri-La Hotel** (✆ **02236-7777**), and the River City pier daily at approximately 7:30am (and include a stop at Bang Pa-In). The ***Horizon II*** from the Shangri-La makes four trips a week (Mon, Wed, Fri–Sat) from Ayutthaya to Bangkok (the outward journey is by minibus). The tour begins at 8am and costs 1,950B ($56/£35). For something more exclusive, the ***Manohra*** ★★ (✆ **02476-0022;** www.manohracruises.com), a teak rice barge converted to a luxury floating hotel with staterooms, leaves every Monday and Thursday for a 3-day/2-night cruise to Ayutthaya; the cost is 48,999B ($1,400/£891) for two.

If you're stuck overnight, the **Krungsri River Hotel** (27/2 Rojana Rd.; ✆ **03524-4333;** www.kungsririver.com), near the train station, is a good choice. Convenient but basic is the **Ayothaya Hotel** (12 Naresuan Rd. Soi 2; ✆ **03525-2249**), with rooms from 1,200B ($34/£22).

5 AN INTRO TO THE EASTERN SEABOARD

Tracing the coastline directly east of Bangkok, there are a few resort spots that are attractive as much for their proximity to Bangkok as anything. Closest is **Pattaya,** one of Thailand's earliest holiday developments and famous (or infamous) for its wild nightlife. The town is always hopping late into the night—guys come from all over the world to live it up. Continuing east from Pattaya, **Ko Samet,** in Rayong Province, is a small island with loads of affordable, makeshift bungalow resorts and a few high-end choices. It is a low-luxe, laid-back little retreat reached by a short ferry ride from the mainland at the town of Ban Phe (via Rayong). **Ko Chang,** Thailand's second-largest island and the last stop before Cambodia to the east, has earned a glowing reputation among travelers for its fabulous west-coast beaches that are now peppered with high-end resorts. Ko Chang is reached via the nondescript town of Trat.

6 PATTAYA

147km (91 miles) E of Bangkok

The current incarnation of **Pattaya** claims its founders' day as June 29, 1959, when a few truckloads of American troops stationed in Isan arrived in overflowing trucks, rented houses along the beach, and had such a hoot that they told their friends. Word spread, and the town became the R & R capital for war-weary American troops over the next many years. The legacy of those early visitors is today's adult playground: hundreds of go-go clubs, beer bars, and massage parlors at beachside.

Tourism boomed in the 1980s, and because unchecked resort development was not accompanied by infrastructure upgrades, beaches became veritable toilets of raw sewage. Despite cleanup projects, the beach is still not at all pleasant.

In 2005, more than 5 million of Thailand's 11 million foreign tourists visited Pattaya. This number will only increase since the opening of Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Just an hour's drive away, Pattaya is as convenient a first stop when you step off the plane at Bangkok.

Pattaya supports a host of international resorts, retreats set in sprawling, manicured seaside gardens. It tries hard to be a family destination, and along with fine accommodations, there are some family activities here, but the mammoth sex-tourism industry kind of puts the kibosh on any wholesome family fun. Neighboring **Jomtien** and **Dongtan** beaches are popular alternatives with less seedy activities and cleaner beaches, but mostly just condominiums—good for day visits.

Pattaya Beach Road is the heart of the town, a long strip of hotels, bars, restaurants, and shops overlooking Pattaya Bay. Pattaya 2nd and Pattaya 3rd roads run parallel to Beach Road and form a busy central grid of small, crowded *sois* bound by North Pattaya Road and South Pattaya Road and bisected by Central Pattaya Road. At both the far northern and southern ends of the strip are two bluffs. Due south is condo-lined Jomtien Beach, a 15-minute ride from Pattaya.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE There are no flights to or from Bangkok, but if you are going to or from Phuket or Ko Samui, it's worth considering Bangkok Airways flights from **U-Tapao** airport, located about 30km (19 miles) south of Pattaya. From there, a minibus into town costs around 200B ($5.70/£3.60).

BY TRAIN Weekday train service leaves from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** at 6:55am and returns from Pattaya at 2:20pm. The 5-hour trip through the countryside is pleasant and costs only 31B (90¢/55p). There's no service on the weekends. Call Hua Lampong in Bangkok (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334) or in Pattaya (✆ **03842-9285**) for information. A shared *songtao* (covered pickup truck) to town from the Pattaya train station is just 30B (85¢/£55).

BY BUS Buses depart from Bangkok's **Eastern Bus Terminal** (Sukhumvit Rd., opposite Soi 63, at Ekamai BTS station; ✆ **02391-2504**) every half-hour from 5am to 11pm daily. For air-conditioned coach service, the fare is 128B ($3.65/£2.30). There's also regular bus service from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (**Mor Chit;** ✆ **02936-2852**).

Air-conditioned buses to and from Bangkok use the bus station in Pattaya on North Pattaya Road (✆ **03842-9877**). A *songtao* to town is 40B ($1.15/70p).

BY TAXI Cabs from Suvarnabhumi International Airport's taxi counter go for 1,050B ($30/£19). Any hotel concierge can negotiate a fare of about 1,500B ($43/£27) with a metered taxi driver to take you to or from Pattaya resort, door to door.

GETTING AROUND

BY MINIBUS/SONGTAO *Songtao* (called **baht buses** here) follow regular routes up and down the main streets. Fares in Pattaya start at 10B (30¢/£20). It's about 30B (85¢/55p) to get to Jomtien (bargain hard). Some hotels operate minibuses as well.

BY CAR **Avis** has an office at the Dusit Resort (✆ **03836-1628**), with self-drive rates from about 2,220B ($63/£40) per day for a Toyota Vigo four-wheel-drive sport vehicle. **Budget** has an office at Liabchayhard Beach Road (✆ **03871-0717**) and offers comparable rates. **Chalee Car Rent** (312–14 Moo 9 Pattaya 3rd Rd.; ✆ **03872-0413;** www.pattayacarrental.com) has a good reputation and, like many smaller firms in town, offers better rates (from 900B/$26/£16). Read contracts closely.

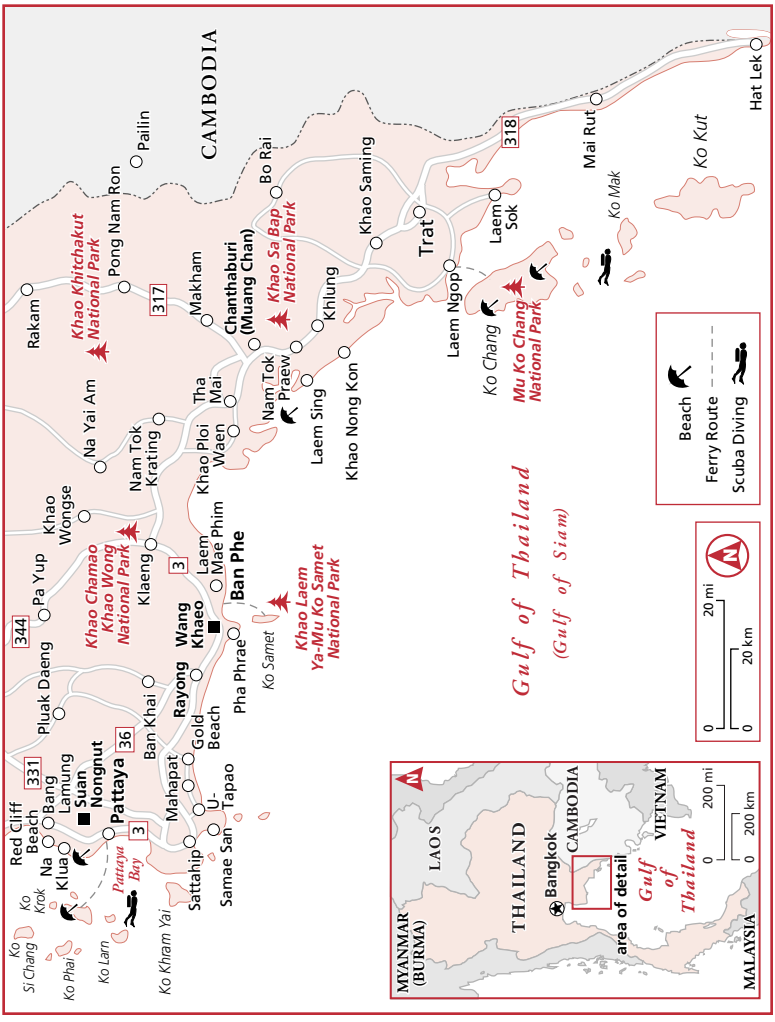
BY MOTORCYCLE Let's be honest, Pattaya's busy roads are full of drunk and reckless foreign drivers on motorbikes, but the brave (or foolish) can rent 150cc motorcycles for 200B ($5.70/£3.60) a day (no insurance). Big choppers and Japanese speed bikes (500cc) will go for 500B to 900B ($14–$26/£9.10–£16) per day. Demand a helmet and, as always, "Renter beware."

FAST FACTS: PATTAYA

There are many independent **money-changing booths,** 24-hour **bank** exchange desks (with better rates), and **ATMs** at every turn in town. **Bangkok Pattaya Hospital** (✆ **03825-9999**) has full services and English-speaking staff. In Pattaya, the number for the **tourist police** is ✆ **1155** or 03842-5937. **Internet access** costs 30B to 60B per hour (85¢–$1.70/55p–£1.10) at a number of cafes along the water (try Soi Yamato). The **post office** is on Soi Post Office near the Royal Garden Plaza (✆ **03842-9340-1**).

WHERE TO STAY

Pattaya accommodations range from seedy to stylish. The town supports a few isolated, peaceful getaways as well. Reserve ahead in high season.



Expensive

Amari Orchid Resort & Tower ★ On the northern end of busy Pattaya, just out of the fray but close enough to walk there, the Amari has good amenities and a helpful staff, with rooms in both the Garden Wing and the new Ocean Tower. The open-air lobby of the Garden Wing is inviting and guest rooms are large, trimmed in dark wood with parquet floors and pleasing, contemporary lines. Rooms in the Ocean Tower are even more luxurious, with open-plan bathrooms, ultramodern fixtures and fittings, and superb views of the bay. Amari also has good in-house dining (see Mantra, under "Where to Dine," below).

Pattaya Beach, Pattaya 20150 (on the very northernmost end of the beachfront road). ✆ **03841-8418.** Fax 03841-8410. www.amari.com. 525 units. $118–$200 (£79–£133) double; from $330 (£198) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 5 bars; 2 outdoor pools; spa; fitness center; Jacuzzi; playground and kids' club; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

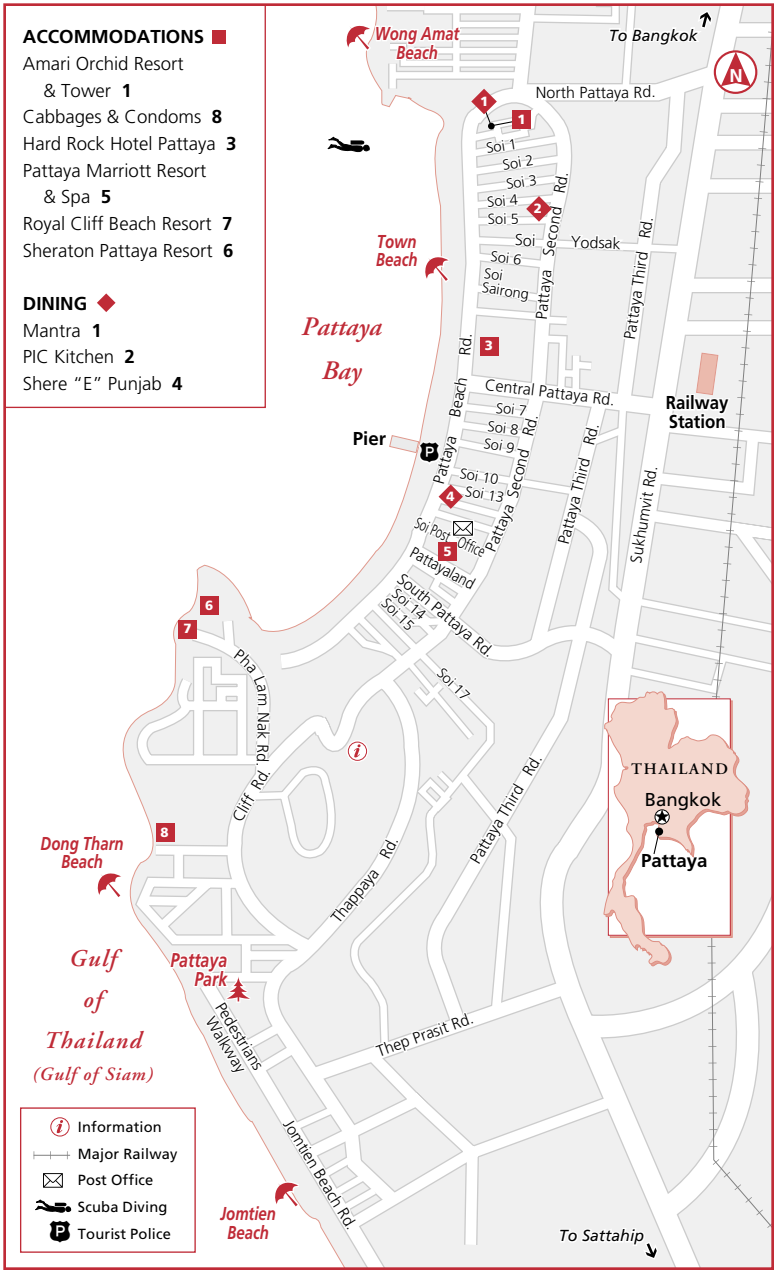
Hard Rock Hotel Pattaya ★★ Kids The ultramodern Hard Rock Hotel is a rollicking good-time in the heart of sordid Pattaya. This is one place in town you might feel okay bringing the kids, and they're sure to have a ball in the sandy-edged pool, game area, and Internet cafe. Rooms are compact and purposely sparse, done in immaculate white set against bright blue or orange. Each room features larger-than-life murals of your favorite rock-'n'-roll idols, from Elvis to John Lennon. Large family suites are a good option and now come with Xbox for the kids. The lobby and adjoining Hard Rock Cafe feature the chain's typical minimuseum of musical memorabilia; the Lil' Rock kids' club is one of the best going; the spa is tops; and the pool area is compact but has lots of shady areas and massage *salas*—a kind of low, Thai-style pavilion that is a better alternative than the beach.

429 Moo 9, Pattaya Beach Rd., Pattaya 20150. ✆ **03842-8755-9.** Fax 03842-1673. www.hardrockhotels.net/pattaya. 320 units. 4,600B–7,400B ($131–$211/£84–£135) double; 12,900B ($369/£235) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; Hard Rock Cafe w/live rock music; huge outdoor lagoon-style pool; fitness center; spa w/massage, Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; watersports equipment; children's club; game room; tour desk; limo service; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms; "e-bar" Internet lounge. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone, CD player.

Pattaya Marriott Resort & Spa ★★ Kids Right in the center of Pattaya Beach and adjoining the Royal Garden Plaza shopping complex, the Marriott has a quiet courtyard garden and landscaped pool area (with the largest pool in Pattaya)—so you can almost forget Pattaya city just beyond the walls. Spacious balconied rooms have views of the gardens or the sea and are done in a tidy, upscale style common to all Thai Marriotts, with lots of nice Thai touches and plush bedding. This resort makes for a great retreat full of all the requisite creature comforts. The adjoining Royal Garden Plaza means access to fine dining and entertainment.

218 Beach Rd., Pattaya 20150. ✆ **03841-2120.** Fax 03842-9926. www.marriott.com. 293 units. 5,050B–6,950B ($144–$199/£92–£126) double; from 8,850B ($253/£161) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; pool w/swim-up bar; 2 floodlit grass tennis courts; large fitness center; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; Thai herbal spa; watersports equipment; children's programs; game room; tour desk; limo service; adjacent shopping mall w/more than 50 shops; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms; Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum; Motion Master Theater. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Royal Cliff Beach Resort ★★★ Comprising the Royal Cliff Grand & Spa, the Royal Wing & Spa, the Royal Cliff Beach Hotel, and the Royal Cliff Terrace, this luxurious compound provides a range of accommodations and is tops in Pattaya. Each property has its own charm. High-end **Royal Cliff Grand** and all-suite **Royal Wing** are the best choices, catering to the well-heeled business traveler. Everything is luxe, from the columned public spaces, chandeliers, and fountains to the large and opulent guest rooms. The Grand's spacious rooms are set in a contemporary, scallop-shaped tower and have marble bathrooms with separate shower stalls and twin sinks. The **Royal Cliff Beach Hotel,** the most affordable choice, is Pattaya's top family resort. Rooms here are also spacious, with bleached wood and pastel decor and large terraces, most with bay views.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THAILAND
Bangkok
Pattaya
Dong Tharn Beach
Gulf of Thailand
(Gulf of Siam)
Pattaya Park
Pedestrians Walkway
Thep Prasit Rd.
Jomtien Beach Rd.
Jomtien Beach
To Sattahip
Information
Major Railway
Post Office
Scuba Diving
Tourist Police

Two-bedroom suites are perfect for families. The beachfront **Royal Cliff Terrace** was the resort's first property and is the most secluded. Rooms boast contemporary decor as well as nice ocean views. The property is far from town and very quiet.

353 Phra Tamnak Rd., Pattaya 20150 (on cliff, south end of Pattaya Bay). ✆ **03825-0421.** Fax 03825-0511. www.royalcliff.com. 1,072 units. 6,400B–7,200B ($183–$206/£116–£131) deluxe double; from 14,400B ($411/£262) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** All Royal Cliff Beach Resort properties share all facilities, including: 10 restaurants; 5 bars (many w/live music); 5 outdoor landscaped pools; golf course; 4-hole putting green; 7 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; 2 squash courts; fully equipped fitness center; 2 spas; sauna, steam, and massage; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment; children's playground; concierge; tour desk; limo service; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; non-smoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Sheraton Pattaya Resort ★★ Perched in the hills south of Pattaya's main beach, the Sheraton is the top choice for a quiet and luxurious getaway. The guest rooms and pavilions descend the hillside, flanking a maze of gardens, waterfalls, and free-form swimming pools. Decorated in pleasing pastel peaches and sea greens, the guest quarters are spacious and contain oversize king-size or queen-size beds. There's an attractive man-made white-sand beach by the water. While the rocky waterfront isn't the most inviting place for a dip, the adventurous will find the water much cleaner than that of Pattaya's main beach.

437 Phra Tamnak Rd., Pattaya 20150 (on cliff, south end of Pattaya Bay). ✆ **03825-9888.** Fax 03825-9899. www.sheraton.com/pattaya. 156 units. 11,000B–16,700B ($314–$477/£200–£304) double; from 60,000B ($1,714/£1,091) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; 3 outdoor pools; fitness center; spa; tour desk; limo service; boutique; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, dataport, Wi-Fi and broadband Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Cabbages & Condoms This lush, comfortable resort was built by Khun Meechai and the same folks who support sustainable rural development and health education throughout Thailand (see their restaurants in both Bangkok and Chiang Rai, on p. 94 and p. 202, respectively). Rooms are cozy here, and the property is a luxurious oasis in the far south of Pattaya. An atmospheric, affordable escape.

366/11 Moo 12 Phra Tam Nak 4 Rd., Nongprue, Banglamung (south of town on the hilltop, not far from the Royal Cliff). ✆ **03825-0556.** Fax 03825-0034. www.cabbagesandcondoms.co.th. 63 units. 2,500B–6,000B ($71–$171/£45–£109) double; from 7,000B ($200/£127) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; large outdoor pool; spa w/massage; tour desk; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

WHERE TO DINE

Busy Pattaya is chockablock with small storefront bars and eateries. You'll find the big fast-food chains well represented (including two Starbucks along the beachfront road). The **Royal Garden** shopping complex (south of town) and the large **Big C Festival Center** (on Pattaya 2nd Rd., north end of town) support a number of very familiar restaurants.

Expensive

Mantra ★★★ INTERNATIONAL Part of Amari's expanding empire on the far north of the main beach, Mantra would be right at home 90 miles west in Bangkok or even 8,000 miles east in New York City. By far the most stylish restaurant in Pattaya, Mantra also serves the best food in town. The menu is eclectic: Australian beef, Indian

curries, Peking duck, pizza, sushi, and dim sum are among the many choices prepared in open-air stations on the restaurant's main floor. The Sunday brunch is something special and worth the trip from Bangkok even if you're not staying in Pattaya. It's partially a buffet, as the salads, sandwiches, sushi, and desserts are all laid out, but you can also have main dishes cooked to order. Without question the most enjoyable meal you'll have in Thailand. Mantra's stylish bar is a happening place on the weekends, too.

At the Amari, 240 Moo 5, Pattaya Beach Rd. (north end of Pattaya). ✆ **03842-9591.** www.mantra-pattaya.com. Main courses 220B–4,600B ($6.30–$131/£4–£84); Sun brunch 1,390B ($40/£25). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 5pm–1am; Sun 11am–3pm and 5pm–1am.

Moderate

PIC Kitchen ★ THAI Named for the Pattaya International Clinic (PIC) Hospital next door (don't worry, they're unrelated), PIC has a nice atmosphere of small teak pavilions, both air-conditioned and open-air, and Thai-style floor seating or romantic tables. Delicious and affordable Thai cuisine is served a la carte or as lunch and dinner set menus. The spring rolls and deep-fried crab claws are mouthwatering. Other dishes come pan-fried, steamed, or charcoal-grilled, with spice added to taste. After dinner, head upstairs to the Jazz Pit and enjoy some live jazz (from 7pm–1am).

Soi 5 Pattaya 2nd Rd. ✆ **03842-8374.** www.pic-kitchen.com. Main courses 150B–550B ($4.30–$16/£2.70–£10). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 10am–2pm and 6pm–midnight.

Shere "E" Punjab NORTHERN INDIAN An inviting little storefront right along the main beach road at town center, Shere "E" Punjab has candlelit tables in air-conditioned comfort. It offers a range of northern Indian cuisine and tandoori-grilled dishes. Everything is cooked to order with fresh ingredients and everything is authentic, a far better choice than the faux-Western eateries in town.

216 Soi 11 Beach Rd. ✆ **03842-0158.** Main courses 150B–380B ($4.30–$11/£2.70–£6.90). AE, MC, V. Daily noon–1am.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Wat Khao Phra Bat is a small temple complex on a hill (often referred to as Buddha Hill) high above Pattaya to the south, with an 18m (60-ft.) Buddha and fantastic views across the town and bay. The **Pattaya Elephant Village** (✆ **03824-9818;** www.elephant-village-pattaya.com) stages elephant shows daily at 2:30pm (700B/$20/£13) and offers jungle treks as well. **Nong Nooch** (✆ **03870-9358-61;** www.nongnoochtropicalgarden.com) is a botanical garden with a culture show on the outskirts of town.

For something completely unusual, **Ripley's Believe It or Not!** (Royal Garden Plaza, 218 Beach Rd., 3rd floor; ✆ **03871-0294**) is hilarious, with unusual exhibits and oddities. It's open from 11am to 11pm daily; admission is 380B ($11/£6.90). Equally strange, yet very impressive, is the **Sanctuary of Truth** ★ (206/5 Moo 5, Naklua; ✆ **03836-7229;** www.sanctuaryoftruth.com), a 100m-tall (328-ft.) wood structure of intricately carved Thai, Khmer, Chinese, and Lao gods and goddesses. It's open daily from 8am to 5pm, and admission costs 500B ($14/£9.10) for adults, 250B ($7.15/£4.55) for kids. Construction is ongoing; carpenters have worked on the structure since 1981 and expect to finish around 2025.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

GOLF The hills around Pattaya are known as the "Golf Paradise of the East," with many international-class courses within a short 40km (25-mile) radius of the city.

- **Bangphra International Golf Club,** 45 Moo 6, Tambon Bang Phra, Sri Racha (✆ **03834-1149**), is the finest course in Pattaya, although it's a long drive (greens fees: 660B/$19/£12 weekdays, 1,320B/$38/£24 weekends).
- **Laem Chabang International Country Club,** 106/8 Moo 4 Tambon Bung, Sri Racha (✆ **03837-2273**), is a 9-hole course designed by Jack Nicklaus with very dramatic scenery (greens fees: 2,500B/$71/£45 weekdays, 3,000B/$86/£55 weekends).
- **Siam Country Club,** 50 Moo 9 Tambol Pong, Banglamung (✆ **03824-9381;** fax 03824-9387; www.siamcountryclub.com), is a short hop from Pattaya and believed to be one of the country's most challenging courses (greens fees 2,500B/$71/£45 weekdays, 3,000B/$86/£55 weekends).

WATERSPORTS Efforts at cleanup are ongoing, but the bay in Pattaya is still quite polluted. It's sad that development ruined the one thing that drew travelers here in the first place. Beach sand is coarse; swimming, if you dare, is best either at the very north of Pattaya Beach or a 15-minute drive south, over the mountain, to Jomtien Beach.

The bay is full of boats ready to take you to outlying islands such as **Ko Khrok, Ko Lan,** and **Ko Sok** for a day of private beach lounging or snorkeling starting at 500B ($14/£9) per head on a full boat (more for a private charter). It'll cost you a bit more to access far-flung **Bamboo Island** or **Ko Man Wichai**—some 2,000B ($57/£36). Contact **Adventure Divers,** 391/77–78 Moo 10 Tappraya Rd., Nongprue Banglamung Chonburi 20260 (✆ **03836-4453**), for scuba trips.

Paragliding around the bay behind a motorboat is a popular beachfront activity; a 5-minute flight costs from 500B ($14/£9.10). Jomtien Beach hosts **windsurfing** and **sea-kayaking;** boards and boats are rented along the beach for rates starting at 200B ($5.70/£3.60) per hour.

PATTAYA AFTER DARK

Pattaya is all flashing neon and blaring music down even the smallest *soi,* an assault on the senses. Places such as the south Pattaya pedestrian area, "Walking Street," are lined with open-air watering holes with bar girls luring passersby: The nightlife finds you in this town with an imploring, "You, mister, where you go?" Go-go bars are everywhere, and red-light "Bar Beer" joints are springing up as fast as local officials can close them down. The city is a larger version of Bangkok's Patpong, complete with "Boyz Town," a row of gay clubs in south Pattaya. The same debauchery that brings so many to Pattaya is pretty sad in the light of day, though, when bleary-eyed revelers stumble around streets once glowing with neon, now bleak and strewn with garbage.

There are a few spots without the sleaze. **Hopf Brewhouse** (219 Beach Rd.; ✆ **03871-0650**) makes its own fine brand of suds, and the in-house Hopf Band plays everything from old Herb Alpert tunes to newer jazzy sounds. **Shenanigan's** (✆ **03871-0641**) is a fun Irish bar at the Royal Garden complex (near the Marriott), with the front entrance on Pattaya 2nd Road. **Henry J. Bean's** (on the beach near the Amari Hotel; ✆ **03842-8161**) has a live band and a light, friendly atmosphere.

The town's campy cabaret shows are touristy good fun. Pattaya's most beautiful *katoeys* (transsexuals) don sequined gowns and feather boas to strut their stuff for packed houses nightly. Both **Tiffany's** (464 Moo 9, 2nd Rd.; ✆ **03842-1700-5**) and **Alcazar** (78/14 Pattaya 2nd Rd., opposite Soi 5; ✆ **03803841-0224**) have hilarious shows much like those in other tourist towns in Thailand. Tickets start at 500B ($14/£9.10). The **Europa Dance Club** (200/3 Soi 16 Walking St.; ✆ **08186-20083**), is a cavernous dance hall featuring hip-hop and trance music.

7 BAN PHE & KO SAMET ★

220km (136 miles) E of Bangkok on Hwy. 3 via Pattaya (or 185km/115 miles via Pattaya bypass)

Tiny **Ko Samet** first became popular with Thais from the poetry of Sunthon Phu, a venerated 19th-century author and Rayong native who set his best-known epic on this "tropical island paradise." Just 1km (1/2 mile) wide, Ko Samet is split by a rocky ridge, and the east coast is lined with budget bungalows and fancy resorts. Ko Samet is a national park (you'll pay 200B/$5.70/£3.60 to enter Diamond Beach), but it's unclear what's being protected here since just about every square foot of beach has been developed. It's best to arrive on a weekday for ease in finding a room, as big groups from Bangkok pack the place on weekends and public holidays. This is quite simply because the island has far and away the best beaches within reach of the capital for a weekend getaway. The island is accessed by ferry from the town of **Ban Phe,** 35km (22 miles) east of Rayong city.

GETTING THERE

BY BUS Buses leave Bangkok every hour between 5am and 7pm for the 3 1/2-hour journey, departing from the city's **Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai),** on Sukhumvit Road opposite Soi 63 (✆ **02391-2504**). The one-way trip to the ferry landing at Ban Phe costs 178B ($5.10/£3.20). If you're coming from Pattaya, you'll have to wait on the highway and flag down anything heading east.

BY MINIBUS **Samet Island Tour** (19/40–42 Soi Yamato [13/1] 2nd Rd., Pattaya; ✆ **03871-0676**) runs regular routes from Pattaya (trip time: 1 hr.; 460B/$13/£8.35 round-trip). Private cars can also be arranged.

BY CAR Take Hwy. 3 east from Bangkok along the longer, more scenic coastal route (trip time: 3 1/2–4 hr.), or the quicker route via Hwy. 3 east to Pattaya, then Hwy. 36 to Rayong, then the coastal Hwy. 3 to Ban Phe (trip time: about 3 hr.).

GETTING TO & AROUND THE ISLAND

Connect by bus from central Rayong to the ferry pier at Ban Phe (✆ **03889-6155**). From there, ferries leave for Ko Samet's northern ferry terminal at Na Dan every half-hour (trip time: 40 min.; 50B/$1.40/90p) or when full. The first boat departs at 8am and the last at 5pm. Several agents at the pier in Ban Phe sell passage directly to Vong Deuan beach for as little as 60B ($1.70/£1.10).

After arriving at the ferry terminal on the northern tip of Ko Samet, you can catch a ***songtao*** (covered pickup truck) to other beaches for between 20B and 50B (60¢–$1.40/35p–90p). Or, you can rent **motorbikes** for about 300B ($8.55/£5.45) per day. There is one road on Samet connecting the main town, Na Dan, with Vong Deuan Beach, halfway down the eastern shore of the island.

FAST FACTS: KO SAMET

Ko Samet has no banks or ATMs, but any resort can change money. The **post office** is at the Naga Bar, along the main road south of Diamond Beach.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Ko Samet once featured only budget accommodations with basic facilities, but now the sky is the limit, with luxury resorts pampering to every whim. In general, rates are higher

than at other beach resorts because food and water must be imported from the mainland. Hotel and transport touts pounce at the pier.

All of the bungalows offer some sort of dining experience, mostly local food and beer, with some Western breakfast offerings. In the evenings on most beaches, tables are set up under twinkling lights alongside big seafood barbecues brimming with the day's catch. It's very pretty. Try **Jep's** on Ao Hin Khok.

Ao Kiew

Paradee ★ These are the most luxurious accommodations on Ko Samet. Reached by private speedboat (6,000B/$171/£109 per person), the Paradee occupies a sliver of land at the southern tip of Samet that offers ocean access on both the east and west coasts (something for both sunrise and sunset enthusiasts). Most of the resort's thatch-roofed villas come with a private pool and Jacuzzi, and all are spacious with imposing four-poster beds, sizable bathrooms, and furnished wood patios. Numerous high-tech amenities include flatscreen TVs, DVD players, and free broadband Internet access. The place is designed as a "couples" resort, so it's not the best place to take kids.

76 Moo 4, Tumbol Phe, Rayong, Ko Samet 21160 (on southern tip of island, best reached by direct boat). ✆ **03864-4283-8.** Fax 03864-4290. www.paradeeresort.com. 40 units. 15,200B ($434/£276) garden villa; 18,400B ($526/£335) garden villa with pool; 25,200B–27,600B ($720–$789/£458–£502) beachfront villa with pool. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment; tour desk; 24-hr. room service; DVD library; Internet cafe. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, free Internet access, minibar, safe, IDD phone.

Ao Prao

This is the only beach on the west coast, reached either by pickup or motorbike from the ferry or else directly by ferry. **Le Vimarn** (✆ **03864-4104;** www.samedresorts.com), a hillside collection of bungalows and villas, offers the highest standard on Ao Prao. Bungalows start at 11,300B ($323/£205). Next door is the more affordable **Ao Prao Resort** (✆ **03864-4104;** www.samedresorts.com), Le Vimarn's sister property, with bungalows from 5,500B ($157/£100). Contact either of these resorts for direct ferry service.

Vong Deuan

This area is the most happening beach in Samet. Busy, with lots of bungalows and open-air eateries, Vong Deuan has a good vibe in the evening and is a fun party spot on the weekend. The beach is about halfway down the island and can be reached by ferry directly from Ban Phe for just 60B ($1.70/£1.10) one-way.

Vong Deuan Villa (✆ **03865-2300**), at the southern end of the beach, has a variety of comfortable and clean rooms starting at just 1,200B ($34/£22). **Vongdeuan Resort** (✆ **03864-4171;** www.vongdeuan.com) has rooms of a similar adequate standard.

8 TRAT & KO CHANG ★

340km (210 miles) E of Bangkok

Trat's dramatic, wooded landscape crests at the Khao Bantat Range, which separates Thailand's easternmost province from neighboring Cambodia. The local economy relies on rubber and chili plantations, fish farming, and fishing. Memories of territorial conflicts with nearby Cambodia are fresh, but the situation is calm. Trat Province is the gateway to the tranquil, unspoiled acres of **Mu Ko Chang National Park,** 52 heavily

wooded islands, most accessible by ferry from the cape at Laem Ngop. **Ko Chang** is scenically beautiful and more peaceful than places such as Phuket and Ko Samui.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02265-5555;** www.bangkokair.com) flies twice (low season) or three times (high season) a day from Bangkok to Trat (trip time: 1 hr., 5 min.) and reservations are necessary in the high season. Trat airport (✆ **03952-5767**) is 20km (12 miles) from the pier at **Ao Thammachat** (for Ko Chang); a combined shuttle bus/ferry ticket costs 270B ($7.70/£4.90), which will take you directly to your resort on the island.

BY BUS There are hourly departures from Bangkok's **Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai)** to the pier at **Ao Thammachat** (✆ **02391-2504;** trip time: 4–5 hr.; 358B/$10/£6.50). Less frequent buses leave from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852;** 383B/$11/£6.95). From Pattaya, you'll have to flag down eastbound buses along Sukhumvit Road; it's a 3 1/2-hour trip. Pattaya tour companies can also arrange direct minivans.

BY CAR Take Hwy. 3 east from Bangkok to Chonburi, then Hwy. 344 southeast to Klaeng (bypassing Pattaya and Rayong), then the coastal Hwy. 3 east through Chanthaburi and south to Trat (trip time: about 5–6 hr.).

GETTING TO & AROUND THE ISLAND

From Trat, you'll hop a shared *songtao* to the pier at Ao Thammachat or Center Point for around 50B ($1.40/90p). Seven ferries depart **Ao Thammachat** daily from 7am to 7pm (trip time: 25 min.; 30B/85¢/55p) and land on Ko Chang at the **Ao Sapparos** ferry terminal. Ferries from **Center Point** leave every hour from 6am to 6pm (trip time: 40 min.; 50B/$1.40/90p), landing at **Dan Kao Cabana Pier.** Less frequent boats leave from the **Laem Ngop** pier (50B/$1.40/90p), a similar 50B ride from Trat. Be warned that the ferry service is sometimes disrupted during the rainy season (May–Oct) if the weather is stormy.

Once on the island, you can hop a *songtao* to your destination, starting at 40B ($1.15/70p) for a 15-minute ride to Hat Sai Khao/White Sand Beach (touts from the many bungalows will offer free rides if you stay at their place).

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** has an office in Trat (100 Moo 1 Trat-Laem Ngop Rd.; ✆ **03959-7259**) and provides information about the nearby islands.

Tips Malaria?

Malaria is endemic to the heavily forested islands of Mu Ko Chang National Park and the jungle-covered foothills of Trat Province, but no cases have been reported in a number of years. It's all the buzz on the boat ride over, but don't believe the hype. Still, it is a good idea, as anywhere in Thailand, to avoid getting bitten. Bring insect repellent (with DEET if possible), and keep skin covered up at dusk and dawn.

If you're arriving in the late evening and get stranded in Trat, the **Muang Trad Hotel,** 4 Sukhumvit Rd. (✆ **03951-1091**), 1 block south of the bus terminal, has rooms from 370B ($11/£6.70) with air-conditioning.

Expensive

Amari Emerald Cove Resort & Spa ★★ The Amari has an easy and effective formula for success in Thailand: well-maintained, professionally staffed resorts with comfortable rooms and excellent dining. Well, maybe it's not that easy, but they sure make it look easy—and the Emerald Cove is a case in point. Some of the most attractive rooms in the Amari chain, with beautiful rosewood floors and comfortable modern furnishings, line an immaculately kept courtyard, the crown jewel being the beachfront 50m (164-ft.) lap pool. During the day, the ever-vigilant staff will assist you with your every need. At night, you have the choice of excellent Thai or Italian cuisine.

88/8 Moo 4, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-2000.** Fax 03955-2001. www.amari.com/emeraldcove. 165 units. 7,600B ($217/£138) superior; 8,880B ($254/£161) deluxe; 15,400B ($440/£280) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; large outdoor pool; children's pool; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; tour desk; car rental; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Panviman ★ The Panviman is another luxurious option on Klong Prao Beach; its spacious grounds are meticulously manicured, and the pool is a beautiful little meander flanked on one side by a casual bar, on the other by the resort's fine dining—everything oriented to great views of the sea (with the accompanying great sunsets). Check out the garden gnomes all about. Rooms are set in high-peaked, Thai-style buildings with arching *naga* roofs. They're done in tile and teak, each with a canopy bed, large sitting area, balcony, and huge stylish bathroom. It's not a private beach, but the resort is far south of central White Sand Beach, so even in high season you might have a vast stretch of sand to yourself.

8/15 Klong Prao Beach, Ko Chang 23170 (a short ride south of White Sand Beach on the west coast of the island). ✆ **03955-1290,** or 02910-8660 in Bangkok. Fax 03955-1283. www.panviman.com. 50 units. 7,500B ($214/£136) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment; tour desk; car rental; transfer services; limited room service; massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Banpu (9/11 Moo 4, White Sand Beach; ✆ **08186-637314;** www.banpuresort.com) is typical of the atmospheric bungalows along White Sand Beach. Rooms start at 2,500B ($71/£45).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Ko Chang, Thailand's second-largest island after Phuket, is the anchor of the 52-island **Mu Ko Chang National Park.** Thickly forested hills rise from its many rocky bays, forming a swaying hump reminiscent of a sleeping elephant (*chang* means elephant). Although they are not indigenous to the island, there are opportunities for elephant treks. The best choice by far is the **Ban Kwan Chang Elephant Camp.** Supported by the Asian Elephant Foundation, the camp offers half-day tours that include feeding, bathing, and riding (the elephants). Contact Jungle Way Bungalows at ✆ **089-223-4795** for information.

Cambodia is visible from the eastern shore of Ko Chang. **Hat Sai Khao (White Sand Beach),** on the island's west coast, is the most popular beach. Twenty minutes by boat

farther south is **Hat Khlong Phrao,** with clusters of bungalows, an inland canal, and a fishing settlement. There is good snorkeling off Ko Chang's south coast; contact tour operators for details and to arrange passage by boat.

9 AN INTRO TO THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

Thailand's slim Malay Peninsula extends 1,250km (775 miles) south from Bangkok to the Malaysia border. The towns of **Cha-Am** and royal **Hua Hin** are just a short hop south of Bangkok, and the ancient temples of **Phetchaburi,** the last outpost of the Khmer empire, are a good day trip from there.

Passing through coastal towns such as Prachuap Kiri Khan and Chumphon, heading farther south you come to **Surat Thani,** a popular jumping-off point for islands in the east: Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, and Ko Tao. As the beach resorts of Phuket dominate the tourist landscape on the west coast, **Ko Samui,** a developed but laid-back resort island in the Gulf of Siam, dominates the east. Nearby **Ko Pha Ngan,** famed for its wild full-moon parties, is gaining prominence as a rustic resort destination, as is **Ko Tao** for its access to some of Thailand's best dive sites.

10 HUA HIN & CHA-AM

Hua Hin: 265km (164 miles) S of Bangkok, 223km (138 miles) N of Chumphon; Cha-Am: 240km (149 miles) S of Bangkok, 248km (154 miles) N of Chumphon

Hua Hin and **Cha-Am,** neighboring towns on the Gulf of Thailand, are together the country's oldest resort area. Developed in the 1920s as a relaxing getaway for Bangkok's elite, the beautiful seaside of "Thailand's Riviera" was a mere 3- to 4-hour journey from the capital by train, thanks to the southern railway's completion in 1916. The royal family was the first to embrace these two small fishing villages as the perfect location for both summer vacations and health retreats. In 1924, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) built the royal Mareukatayawan Palace amid the tall evergreens that lined these stretches of golden sand. At the same time, the Royal Hua Hin Golf Course opened as the first course in Thailand. As Bangkok's upper classes began building summer bungalows along the shore, the State Railway opened the Hua Hin Railway Hotel for tourists, which stands today as the Sofitel Central Hua Hin Resort, and the current king of Thailand spends much of his time at his regal residence just north of town. Today, the area's clean sea and beaches support some unique resorts, and nearby **Phetchaburi** (see "Side Trips from Hua Hin & Cha-Am," later in this section) is a fascinating and easy day trip to experience a bit of Thai history and culture.

Plan your trip for the months between November and May to get the most sunshine and least rain, but note that from about mid-December to mid-January, Hua Hin and Cha-Am reach peak levels and bookings should be made well in advance (at higher rates). This is also increasingly true for weekends year-round, as more and more weekenders from Bangkok are making Hua Hin their destination of choice.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **SGA Airlines** (www.sga.co.th) has two daily flights (flight time: 50 min.) from Bangkok on 12-seater planes for 3,700B (one-way; $106/£67).

BY TRAIN Both Hua Hin and Cha-Am are reached via the train station in Hua Hin. Ten trains make the daily trek from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334). The trip is just more than 4 hours.

The **Hua Hin Railway Station** (✆ **03251-1073**) is at the tip of Damnoenkasem Road, which slices through the center of town straight to the beach. Pickup-truck taxis *(songtao)* or tuk-tuks to town start at 50B ($1.40/90p).

BY BUS The bus is the most efficient choice for travel from Bangkok. Buses depart from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02435-1195**) regularly between 5am and 10pm (180B/$5.15/£3.30). There are also five daily buses to Cha-Am between 5am and 2pm (150B/$4.30/£2.70).

Buses from Bangkok arrive in Hua Hin at the air-conditioned bus station on Srasong Road, 1 block north of Damnoenkasem Road (✆ **03251-1230**). From here it's easy to find a *songtao* or tuk-tuk to take you to your destination. The Cha-Am bus station is on the main beach road (✆ **03242-5307**).

Minibuses can be arranged at any hotel or travel agent in either Bangkok or Hua Hin. Minivan departures (✆ **08163-30609**) leave every 30 minutes from the west side of the traffic circle at Bangkok's busy Victory Monument (a stop on the BTS skytrain) between 5:30am and 6pm and cost 200B ($5.70/£3.60).

BY CAR From Bangkok, take Route 35, the Thonburi-Paktho Highway, southwest and allow 2 to 4 hours, depending on traffic.

GETTING AROUND

Despite all the tourist traffic, **Hua Hin** is easy to navigate. The main artery, Petchkasem Road, runs parallel to the waterfront about 4 blocks inland. Wide Damnoenkasem Road cuts through Petchkasem and runs straight to the beach. On the north side of Damnoenkasem toward the waterfront, you'll find a cluster of guesthouses, restaurants, shopping, and nightspots lining the narrow lanes.

Smaller **Cha-Am** is a 25-minute drive north of Hua Hin along Petchkasem Road. Ruamchit Road, also known as Beach Road, hugs the shore and is lined with shops, restaurants, hotels, and motels. Cha-Am's resorts line the 8km (5-mile) stretch of beach that runs south from the village toward Hua Hin.

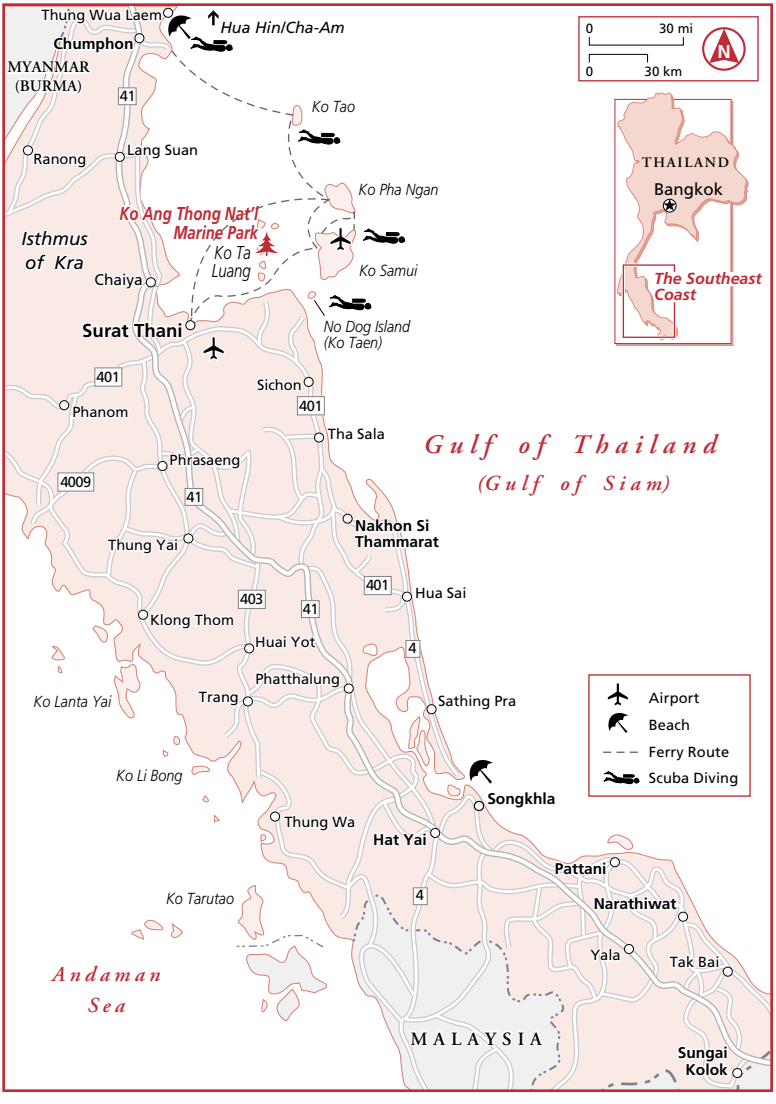
BY SONGTAO Pickup-truck taxis follow regular routes in Hua Hin, passing the railway station and bus terminals at regular intervals. Flag one down that's going in your direction. Fares range from 10B to 20B (30¢–60¢/20p–35p) within town, while stops at outlying resorts will cost up to 50B ($1.40/90p). Trips between Hua Hin and Cha-Am are between 100B and 200B ($2.85–$5.70/£1.80–£3.60).

BY TUK-TUK Tuk-tuk rides are negotiable, as always, but expect to pay as little as 40B ($1.15/70p) for a ride within town.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI Within each town, motorcycle-taxi fares begin at 20B (60¢/35p). The taxi drivers, identifiable by colorful numbered vests, are a good way to get to your resort if you're in Cha-Am after hours (about 100B/$2.85/£1.80).

BY TRISHAW Trishaws, or *samlor,* can be hired for short distances in town (from 20B/60¢/35). You can also negotiate an hourly rate.

BY CAR/MOTORCYCLE **Avis** has a desk at the Tanawit Hotel (✆ **03253-1238**). Self-drive rates start at 1,500B ($43/£27). Cheaper alternatives can be rented from stands near the beach on Damnoenkasem Road. A 100cc motorcycle goes for around 200B ($5.70/£3.60) per day.



VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Hua Hin Tourist Information Center** (✆ **03251-1047** or 03253-2433) is in the center of town, tucked behind the city shrine at the corner of Damnoenkasem and Petchkasem roads. Open daily from 8:30am to 8pm. In Cha-Am, the **TAT office** (✆ **03247-1005** or 03247-1006) is inconveniently located on the corner of Petchkasem Road and Narathip Road.

FAST FACTS: HUA HIN & CHA-AM

IN HUA HIN All major **banks** are along Petchkasem Road to the north of Damnoenkasem; there are also many money changers throughout the town. The main **post office** (✆ **03251-1350**) is on Damnoenkasem Road near the Petchkasem intersection. Hua Hin has **Internet cafes** along the more-traveled shopping streets. The **Hua Hin Hospital** (✆ **03252-0371**) is in the north of town along Petchkasem Road. Call the **tourist police** at ✆ **03251-5995.**

IN CHA-AM **Banks** and the **Muangphet Thonburi Hospital** (✆ **03241-5190**) are centered along Petchkasem Road, while the **post office** is on Beach Road. **Internet access** is available along the beach road. Call the **tourist police** at ✆ **03251-5995.**

WHERE TO STAY IN HUA HIN

Very Expensive

Chiva-Som International Health Resort ★★★ Chiva-Som is a new beginning for many. One of the finest high-end health resorts in the region, this peaceful campus is a sublime collection of handsome pavilions, bungalows, and central buildings dressed in fine teak and sea-colored tiles nestled in landscaped grounds just beyond a pristine beach. But what brings so many to Chiva-Som are its spa programs: From chi gong to chin-ups, muscle straining to massage, a stay at Chiva-Som is a chance to escape the workaday world and focus on development of body and mind. Upon check-in, you'll fill out an extensive survey, have a brief medical checkup, and meet with a counselor who can tailor a program to fit your needs, goals, and budget or package you have booked (there is a wide range). Guests might focus on early morning yoga, stretching, and tough workouts, or go for gentle massages, aromatherapy, even isolation chambers and past-life regression workshops. The choices are many, and the personal trainers, staff, and facilities are unmatched in the region. The resort's spa cuisine is not all granola and oats, but delicious and healthy fare, and there is a nice bond that develops between guests and staff in weekly barbecues and frequent "mocktail" parties. The spa treatments are fantastic: Don't pass up the signature Chiva-Som massage. Day-spa visitors are welcome.

73/4 Petchkasem Rd., Hua Hin 77110 (5-min. drive south of Hua Hin). ✆ **03253-6536.** Fax 03251-1154. www.chivasom.com. 57 units. All rates are quoted per person for a 3-night stay: $1,545 (£1,030) ocean-view double; $1,950 (£1,300) pavilion; from $3,075 (£2,050) suite. These rates include 3 spa-cuisine meals per day, health and beauty consultations, daily massage, and participation in fitness and leisure activities. Contact the resort about other packages. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; ozonated indoor swimming pool and outdoor swimming pool; golf course nearby; amazing fitness center w/personal trainers and exercise classes; his-and-hers spas w/steam and hydrotherapy treatments, massage, beauty treatments, floatation, and medical advisement; watersports equipment; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; limo service; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Anantara Resort Hua Hin ★★ The Anantara is a collection of teak pavilions surrounded by lily ponds, and from the hotel's most luxurious rooms and their wide balconies, you can hear chirping frogs and watch buzzing dragonflies. More affordable rooms cluster around a manicured courtyard. All accommodations are furnished in Thai style with teak-and-rattan furniture. Deluxe units have either a garden or sea view, with terrace rooms offering large patios perfect for private barbecues. Suites have enormous aggregate bathtubs that open to guest rooms via a sliding door. Both suites and lagoon rooms offer

exclusive use of the lagoon pool (adults only), as w ell as other fine per ks. Fine-dining options are many, and the resort's spa is large and luxurious.

43/1 P etchkasem Beach Rd ., Hua H in 77110. ✆ **03252-0250.** Fax 03252-0259. w ww.anantara.com. 137 units. 5,600B–7,100B ($160–$203/£102–£129) delux e; 9,400B ($269/£171) superior lagoon; 14,400B ($411/£262) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 3 bars; lounge; 2 outdoor pools; children's pool; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa w/sauna, steam, massage; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment and instruc tion; bike and mot orcycle r ental; childr en's pla yground; c oncierge; t our desk ; car r ental; limo service; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Hilton Hua Hin Resort & Spa ★★ Right in the heart of downtown Hua Hin, this massive tower overlooks the main beach. It's a Hilton, which means a fine room standard and cour teous staff. A ccommodations ar e spacious and w ell appointed, with balconies overlooking the sea. New spa suites are particularly classy, with sleek contemporary Thai decor. The marble lobby with quiet r eflection pools is w elcoming, the beachside pool is luxurious, and there are extensive indoor facilities and activities for rainy days. The Hua Hin Resort is a top international standar d and the best location for str olling the main beach area, in-town shopping, and nightlife.

33 Nar etdamri Rd ., Hua H in 77110 (on the main beach and in the hear t of do wntown shopping). ✆ **03253-8999.** Fax 02253-8990. www.huahin.hilton.com. 296 units. 8,500B–10,500B ($243–$300/£155–£191) double; 12,000B ($343/£218) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; 2 tennis courts; 2 squash courts; large fitness center; spa w/massage, Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; concierge; tour desk; car rental; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, sat ellite TV w/in-house mo vies, Wi-Fi and br oadband Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Hua Hin Marriott Resor t & Spa ★ Kids From the giant swinging couches in the main lobby to the large central pavilions, the M arriott is done in a grand, if exaggerated, Thai style. I t attracts large gr oups, but is a good choice for families. P onds, pools, boats, golf, tennis, and other spor ts venues dot the junglelike gr ounds leading to the open beach area. There is a good childr en's club, and the staff throughout the hotel seems to r eally enjoy kids, not just tolerate them. The hotel is relatively far from the busy town center, but provides shuttle ser vice. Deluxe rooms are the best choice—large, amenity-filled, and facing the sea. Terrace rooms at beachside are worth the bump up. The spa is luxurious, too.

107/1 Petchkasem Beach Rd ., Hua H in 77110. ✆ **888/236-2427** in the U .S., or 03251-1881. F ax 03251-2422. 216 units . 3,600B–5,200B ($103–$149/£65–£95) double; 5,700B–6,550B ($163–$187/£104–£119) beachfront; fr om 17,000B ($486/£309) suit e. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 r estaurants; lounge; out door pool; golf course nearby; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment; bike rental; childr en's pla yground and z oo; c oncierge; t our desk ; car r ental; limo ser vice; shopping ar cade; salon; 24-hr. r oom ser vice; massage; bab ysitting; laundr y ser vice; dr y cleaning; nonsmok ing r ooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Sofitel C entara Hua Hin Resor t ★★★ The original H ua H in Railway H otel opened in the 1920s and is the classiest, most luxurious hotel going. There's a cool, calm colonial effect to the white washed buildings, shaded v erandas and walkways, fine wooden details, r ed-tile r oofs, and immaculate gar dens with topiaries. A small museum contains photography and memorabilia, and the original 14 bedr ooms are preserved for posterity. Subsequent additions and r enovations over the y ears have expanded the place into a large and modern full-facility property without sacrificing a bit of its former charm. The original rooms have their unique appeal, but the ne wer rooms are larger, brighter, and mor e comfortable. With furnishings that reflect the hotel's old beach-resort feel, they are still modern

and cozy. Sofitel's three magnificent outdoor pools are finely landscaped and have sun decks under shady trees. The spa, in its own beachside bungalow, provides full-service health and beauty treatments, and the fitness center is extensive.

1 Damnoenkasem Rd., Hua Hin 77110 (in the center of town by the beach). ✆ **800/221-4542** in the U.S., or 03251-2021. Fax 03251-1014. www.sofitel.com. 249 units. 8,000B–10,000B ($229–$286/£146–£182) double; from 14,000B ($400/£255) suite. DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lounge and bar; 3 outdoor pools; putting green and miniature golf; golf course nearby; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa w/massage; watersports equipment; bike rental; kids' club; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms; daily crafts and language lessons; nature tours; billiards room. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

For affordable, in-town accommodations, try **PP Villa** (11 Damnoenkasem Rd.; ✆ **03253-3785**), with tidy rooms from 900B ($26/£16); or the **Fresh Inn Hotel** (132 Naretdamri Rd., across from the Hilton; ✆ **03251-1389**), with clean doubles starting at 1,500B ($43/£27).

WHERE TO STAY IN CHA-AM

Moderate

Regent Cha-Am ★ No relation to the Regent chain, the Regent Cha-Am is a sprawling property, the combination of three resorts for a total of some 708 rooms (at the Regent Resort and more luxurious Regency Wing and Regent Chalet). There are lots of services, large pools, watersports, squash, and a small fitness area. The main resort is a massive courtyard, while the Chalet is a separate, quieter bungalow facility (the best choice). Standard rooms are comfortable and affordable, done up like the average chain hotel but very clean and cozy. The resort is on the road between Hua Hin and Cha-Am—it's a long ride to either. Come with your own wheels or else be stuck here. The Regent is busy year-round, mostly on the weekends.

849/21 Petchkasem Rd., Cha-Am 76120. ✆ **03250-8140-3.** Fax 03250-8149. www.regent-chaam.com. 708 units. 3,000B–4,500B ($86–$129/£55–£82) double; from 7,650B ($219/£139) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; 3 pools; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; squash courts; fitness center; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment; bike and motorcycle rental; game room; tour desk; limo service; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

The resorts have more restaurants than there is room to list; no matter where you stay, you'll have great in-house dining options. The main piers in both Hua Hin and Cha-Am are busy every morning, when fishing boats return with their loads. Nearby open-air restaurants serve fresh seafood at a fraction of what you'd pay in Bangkok. In town, there are lots of small storefront eateries, tourist cafes, and seafood places along the beach. The **Night Market,** on Dechanuchit Road west of Petchkasem Road in the north end of Hua Hin, is a great spot for authentic local eats for very little.

Itsara ★ THAI In a two-story seaside home built in the 1920s, this restaurant has a real laid-back charm, from the noisy open kitchen to the terrace seating and views of the beach—quite atmospheric. It's a good place to get together with friends, cover the table with dishes, and enjoy the good life. Specialties include a sizzling hot plate of glass noodles with prawn, squid, pork, and vegetables. Fresh seafood and meats are prepared steamed or deep-fried, and can be served with either salt, chili, or red-curry paste.

45 Napkehard St., Hua Hin (seaside, a 50B/$1.25/70p trishaw ride north from the town center). ✆ **03253-0574.** Reservations recommended for Sat dinner. Main courses 90B–420B ($2.60–$12/£1.60–£7.60). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The stunning Khmer-style temples of **Phetchaburi** ★★ (described at the end of this section) are the most significant cultural sights near Hua Hin and Cha-Am, but most folks are here simply to escape Bangkok and enjoy the beaches.

The **Sofitel Centara Hua Hin Resort** (see "Where to Stay in Hua Hin," above), originally built in the 1920s for Thai royals and their guests, is itself an attraction. Visitors are welcome to tour the grounds or enjoy **high tea** in a quaint garden area (daily 3:30–6pm; 450B/$13/£8).

Shoppers will enjoy Hua Hin's 2-block-long **Night Market** ★ (on Dechanuchit Rd. west of Petchkasem Rd., in the north end of town), which is busy from dusk until late with small food stalls and vendors selling tasty treats and fun trinkets. On Damnoenkasem Road near the beach, you can also browse local handicrafts and batik clothing.

For nightlife, your best bet is Hua Hin. A 15-minute stroll through the labyrinth of *sois* between Damnoenkasem, Poolsuk, and Dechanuchit roads near the beach reveals all sorts of small places to stop for a cocktail, as well as lots of hostess bars that bring to mind Pattaya and Patpong in Bangkok.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

GOLF Hua Hin is a golf getaway for Bangkokians. It's best to make reservations. The larger hotels run shuttles to all courses.

- **Royal Hua Hin Golf Course,** Damnoenkasem Road near the Hua Hin Railway Station (✆ **03251-2475**), was Thailand's first championship golf course, opened in 1924. Don't miss the many topiary figures along its fairways (greens fees: 2,000B/$57/£36).
- **Springfield Royal Country Club,** 193 Moo 6 Huay-Sai Nua, Petchkasem Road, Cha-Am (✆ **03270-9222**), designed by Jack Nicklaus in 1993, is in a beautiful valley setting—the best by far (greens fees: 3,500B/$100/£64).

WATERSPORTS Most resorts forbid noisy jet skis, but the beaches are lined with young entrepreneurs renting them out for around 1,000B ($28/£18) per half-hour. Windsurfers and Hobie Cats are available at most resorts or through small outfits along the beach, starting at 500B ($14/£9) and 1,200B ($34/£22) per hour, respectively. Call **Western Tours** (11 Damnoenkasem Rd.; ✆ **03253-3303**) to ask about snorkeling trips to outer islands for about 2,200B ($63/£36) per person.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HUA HIN & CHA-AM

Phetchaburi ★★

Phetchaburi dates from the same period as Ayutthaya and Kanchanaburi, and later served as an important military city. Phetchaburi's palace and historically significant temples are the highlights of an excellent day trip—it's just an hour from Hua Hin. The main attraction is **Phra Nakhorn Khiri,** a 19th-century summer palace of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in the hills overlooking the city, reachable by cable car. You'll also find a collection of important royal temples and the summer palaces of other kings. **Western Tours** (11 Damnoenkasem Rd.; ✆ **03253-3303**) has a day excursion every Thursday that costs 1,300B ($37/£24).

Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park

Just 40 minutes' drive south of Hua Hin, Khao Sam Roi Yot, or the "Mountain of Three Hundred Peaks," offers great short hikes to panoramic views of the coast. Of the park's two caves, Kaew Cave is the most interesting, housing a *sala* pavilion that was built in 1890 for King Chulalongkorn.

11 SURAT THANI

644km (399 miles) S of Bangkok

Surat Thani is believed to have been an important center of the Sumatra-based Srivijaya Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries. Today, it's known to foreigners as the gateway to beautiful Ko Samui and to Thais as a rich agricultural province. Surat is the main jumping-off point for the eastern islands **Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan,** and **Ko Tao** (each described in the following sections of this chapter), as well as the navigable jungles of **Khao Sok National Park.**

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

Surat Thani is built up along the south shore of the Tapi River. **Talad Mai Road,** 2 blocks south of the river, is the city's main street, with the TAT office at its west end and the bus station and central market at its east end. Frequent *songtao* run along Talad Mai; prices are based on distance, but rarely exceed 20B (60¢/35p).

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **02545-3690-92** in Bangkok) and **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999** in Bangkok) both have daily flights from Bangkok to Surat Thani (trip time: 70 min.). You can get on a bus to town for 100B ($2.85/£1.80). The local Thai Airways office is at 3/27–28 Karoonrat Rd. (✆ **07727-2610**), just south of town.

BY TRAIN Ten trains to Surat Thani leave daily from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334; trip time: 13 hr.). A second-class sleeper is 758B ($22/£13); a second-class seat in a fan compartment is 438B ($12/£7.95). The Surat Thani train station is very inconvenient, but buses meet trains to transport folks to town for 20B (60¢/35p), or if you roll in on the morning train, you can just hop on one of the travel-agent buses to the ferry.

BY BUS Two VIP 24-seater buses leave daily from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02435-1195;** trip time: 10 hr.; 660B/$19/£12). Air-conditioned buses leave daily from Phuket's bus terminal off Phang-nga Road opposite the Royal Phuket City Hotel (✆ **07621-1977;** trip time: 5 hr.; 240B/$6.85/£4.35). Also from Phuket, minivans travel to Surat Thani daily (trip time: 4 hr.; 300B/$8.60/£5.45)—you can find them across from the Montri Hotel on Suthat Road. The bus terminal for most destinations is on Kaset II Road, a block east of the main road, but most buses from Bangkok pull into the new bus station 2km (1 1/4 miles) southwest of town.

BY MINIVAN The best way to travel between southern cities is by privately operated air-conditioned minivans. They are affordable and run on regular schedules between Surat Thani and Chumphon, Ranong, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Hat Yai, and beyond. The best way to arrange these trips is by consulting your hotel's front desk. You can go door-to-door to the hotel of your choice, usually for around 200B ($5.70/£3.60).

BY CAR Take Hwy. 4 south from Bangkok to Chumphon, then Hwy. 41 south direct to Surat Thani.

VISITOR INFORMATION

For information about Surat Thani, Ko Samui, and Ko Pha Ngan, contact the **TAT** office at 5 Talad Mai Rd., Surat Thani (✆ **07728-8818**), near the Wang Tai Hotel.

FAST FACTS: SURAT THANI

Major **banks** along Talad Mai Road have ATMs and will perform currency exchanges. The **Post Office** and **Overseas Call Office** are together on Na Muang and Chonkasean roads near the center of town. The **Taksin Hospital** (✆ **07727-3239**) is at the north end of Talad Mai Road. The **tourist police** (✆ **07720-0475**) are with the TAT on Talad Mai Road.

WHERE TO STAY

For most, Surat Thani is just a stopping-off point for trips to the islands. If you have a layover, the best choice in town is the **100 Islands Resort & Spa** (19/6 Moo 6 Bypass Rd.; ✆ **07720-1150;** www.roikoh.com), a fancy boutique hotel just south of the town center, with attractive doubles beginning at 850B ($24/£15). Nearby, with similar rates and a swimming pool too, is the **Wang Tai Hotel** (1 Talad Mai Rd.; ✆ **07728-3020**). More convenient to the market and town transport is the **Tapee Hotel** (100 Chonkasem Rd.; ✆ **07727-2575;** www.tapeehotel.com) with basic but clean rooms from 440B ($12/£8).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Surat is a typical small Thai city and, for most foreign visitors, little more than a transportation hub to the islands of Ko Samui and Ko Pha Ngan. Most people will want to press on. If it is your only stop in Thailand (on the way to Ko Samui, for example), give the town a wander and see what Thai life is all about (take to the small streets and find a *wat*). Outside of town, popular day trips include the **Monkey Training College** (24 Moo 4, Tambon Thungkong; ✆ **07722-7351**), where monkeys are trained to get coconuts.

SIDE TRIPS FROM SURAT THANI

Khao Sok National Park ★

Khao Sok, known for its stunning scenery and exotic wildlife, is convenient to both Surat Thani and Phuket. The park is some 646 sq. km (252 sq. miles) in area, traced by jungle waterways and steep trails among craggy, limestone cliffs—imagine the jutting formations of Phang Nga Bay or Krabi, only inland. Rising some 1,000m (3,280 ft.), and laced with shaggy patches of forest, the dense jungle habitat of the park is literally crawling with life. Among the underbrush and thick vines hanging from the high canopy, tigers, leopards, golden cats, and even elephants still wander freely, and visitors commonly spot Malaysian sun bear, gibbons, langurs, macaques, civets, flying lemur, and squirrels. Keep your eyes peeled for the more than 200 species of birds, including hornbills, woodpeckers, and king fishers. As for the flora, there is every variety—the Raffelesia, the largest flower in the world and a parasite, finds vines from which to draw its nourishment (the largest are up to 1m/3¹/₄ ft. wide).

One of the best ways to get up close with the buried fauna of the park is by kayak along the nether reaches of the large reservoir. Jungle animals are skittish, so your chances of seeing something rare by noisily tromping through the bush are slim at best. Contact the folks at **Paddle Asia** (9/71 Thanon Rasdanusorn, in Phuket; ✆ **07624-0952;** fax 07621-6145; www.paddleasia.com) for details.

12 KO SAMUI

84km (52 miles) E of Surat Thani

Ko Samui lies 84km (52 miles) off the east coast in the Gulf of Thailand, near the mainland commercial town of Surat Thani. The island is hilly, densely forested, and rimmed with coconut-palm plantations. Since the 1850s, Chinese merchants sailed from as far as Hainan Island in the South China Sea to trade coconuts and cotton, the island's two most profitable products.

Once a popular hippie haven of pristine beaches, idyllic bungalows, and thatched eateries along dirt roads, Samui is now an international resort area with all of the attendant comforts and crowding. If you came here as a backpacker in the past, you may not want to come back to see McDonald's and a Wal-Mart–style shopping outlet where hammocks once hung. An international airport was opened in 1988 and now greets up to 20 packed daily flights. Fine hotels and large resorts are popping up all over the island, making any comparisons with Phuket apt.

The high season on Ko Samui is from mid-December to mid-January. January through April have the best weather, before it gets hot. October through mid-December are the wettest months, with November bringing extreme rain and winds that make the east side of the island rough for swimming. August sees a brief increase in visitors, a mini high season, but the island's west side is often buffeted by summer monsoons from the mainland.

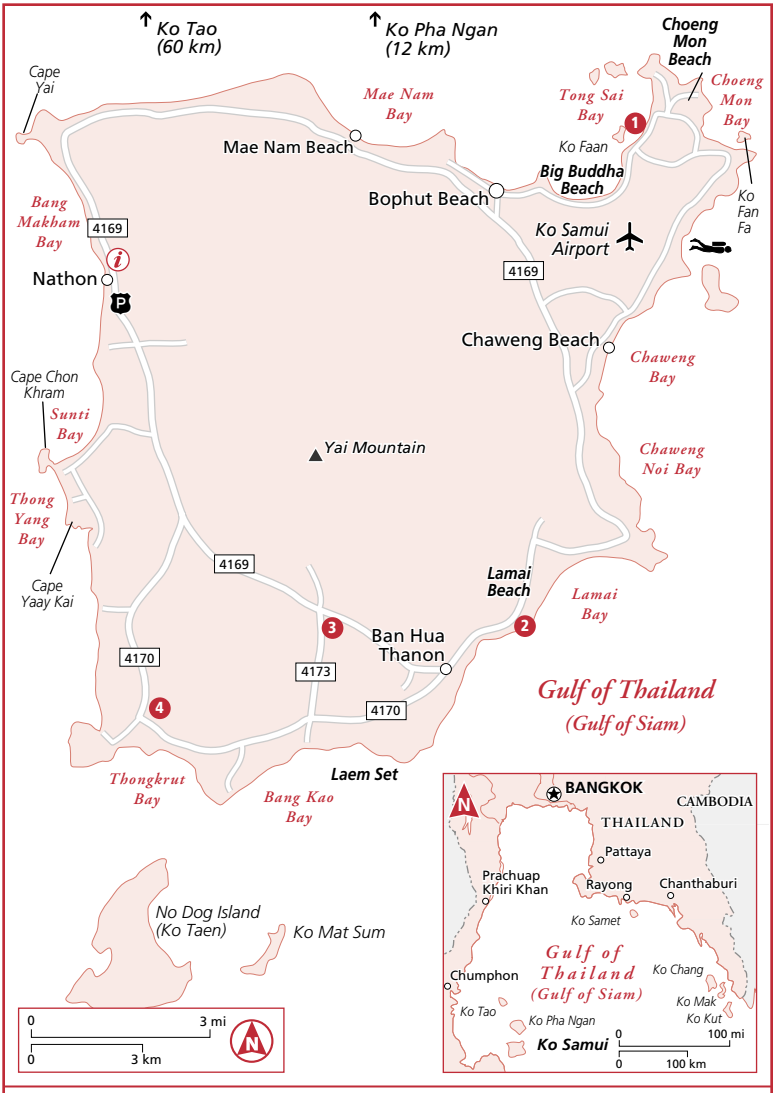
GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02265-5555** in Bangkok; www.bangkokair.com) connects Ko Samui with Bangkok and Phuket. **THAI Airways** (✆ **02356-1111** in Bangkok) now also has flights from Bangkok. There are more than a dozen flights a day.

Ko Samui Airport (✆ **07742-5011**) is a little slice of heaven—open-air pavilions with thatch roofs surrounded by gardens and palms. If you're staying at a larger resort, airport shuttles can be arranged when you book your room. There's also a convenient minivan service: Book your ticket at the transportation counter upon arrival, and you'll get door-to-door service for around 200B ($5.70/£3.60), depending which beach you are going to. If you depart Ko Samui via the airport, a hefty 500B ($14/£9) airport tax is added to your ticket charge.

BY FERRY If you're traveling overland, **Songserm** (✆ **07728-7124** in Surat Thani) runs a convenient ferry loop from Surat Thani with stops in Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, and Ko Tao, finishing at Chumphon (and back again). The total trip is about 4 hours, while the Surat-Samui leg is 2 hours. Rates are as follows: Surat-Samui, 240B ($6.85/£4.35); Samui–Pha Ngan, 220B ($6.30/£4); Pha Ngan–Ko Tao, 250B ($7.15/£4.55); Ko Tao–Chumphon, 450B ($13/£8.20). The boat leaves at 8am.

An alternative is to get a combination bus and high-speed catamaran ticket from **Lomprayah** (✆ **02629-2569** in Bangkok; www.lomprayah.com). The bus goes from Bangkok to Chumphon, from where the catamaran goes to Ko Tao and Ko Pha Ngan before arriving at Ko Samui. The journey takes around 12 hours and costs 1,200B ($34/£22).



Hin Ta and Hin Yai
(Grandfather and Grandmother Stones) **2**
Samui Snake Farm **4**
Wat Khunaram (Mummified Monk) **3**
Wat Phrayai (Big Buddha) **1**

Airport
Information
Mountain
Scuba Diving
Tourist Police

GETTING AROUND

With a total area of 233 sq. km (91 sq. miles), you can trace Samui's entire coastline by car in about 2 1/2 hours. The Ko Samui Airport is in the northeast corner of the island. The hydrofoils, car ferry, and express boats arrive on the west coast, in or near (depending on the boat) **Nathon,** just a tiny town with a few banks, the TAT office, and the main post office (few visitors spend much time here). The main road (Hwy. 4169, also called the "ring road") circles the island. The long east-coast stretch between **Chaweng** and **Lamai** beaches is the most popular destination for visitors and, consequently, where you'll find the greatest concentration of hotels and bungalows. The south coast has a few little hideaways, too.

BY SONGTAO *Songtao* are the easiest and most efficient way to get around the island. They advertise their destinations—to such beaches as Lamai, Chaweng, and Mai Nam—with colorfully painted signs and all follow Route 4169, the ring road, around the island, either clockwise or counterclockwise. You can hail one anywhere along the highway or along beach roads. Most stop running regular routes after sundown, after which some will hang around outside the discos in Chaweng to take night owls home to other beaches, but negotiate the fare first, or you'll get taken for a ride in more than one sense.

BY TAXI Metered taxis loiter outside most resorts and on virtually every street corner in Chaweng, but most drivers refuse to switch the meter on. If you're used to Bangkok's metered taxis, the prices here will come as a shock. A ride between beaches will set you back 200B ($5.70/£3.60) with some bargaining; rides to and from the airport usually run 400B to 500B ($11–$14/£7.30–£9). Thus taxis are a good option only if you need to get somewhere quickly; otherwise, stick to *songtao.*

BY CAR Ko Samui's roads are narrow, winding, and poorly maintained, with few lights at night to guide you. Road accidents are many, but renting a car is a far better idea than going by motorcycle. Your defensive driving skills will be required to navigate around slow-moving trucks and motorcycles at the side of the road, not to mention the occasional wandering dog.

Budget Car Rental has an office at the Samui Airport (✆ **07742-7188**). It rents a host of vehicles, starting with a Honda Jazz at just 950B ($27/£17) a day. **Avis** also has an office here (✆ **08470-08161**). Beachside rental companies and travel agents rent for as low as 800B ($23/£15) per day, but don't expect solid insurance coverage.

BY MOTORCYCLE Road accidents injure or kill an inordinate number of tourists and locals each year on Ko Samui, mostly motorcycle riders. Still, two wheels and a motor is still the most popular way to get around the island. The roads on Ko Samui are busy, so stay left and close to the shoulder of the road to make way for passing cars and trucks. And go easy: Racing around the island lands many in the hospital, or worse. The fine for not wearing a helmet is 500B ($14/£9), but it's enforced irregularly. Travel agencies and small operators rent motorcycles in popular beach areas for as little as 150B ($4.30/£2.70) per day.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** information center is on Thawiratchaphakdi Road, just north of the main ferry terminal in Nathon (✆ **07742-0504**). You'll also find a host of free small-press magazines and maps at retailers throughout Ko Samui.

FAST FACTS: KO SAMUI

All the major **banks** are in Nathon along Thawiratchaphakdi Road. In Chaweng, you'll find numerous money changers and ATMs; try Krung Thai Bank, opposite Starbucks. Hotels and guesthouses also accept traveler's checks. If you need medical attention, **Samui International Hospital** (✆ **07723-0781-2;** www.sih.co.th) is a fine facility in North Chaeweng with English-speaking physicians who also make house calls.

For **Internet access,** there are a number of places in Chaweng—one option is **Coffee Net** (184/22 Moo 2 Chaweng; ✆ **07796-0667**). For the **tourist police,** dial ✆ **07742-1281.** The main **post office** is on Chonwithee Road in Nathon, but you probably won't hike all the way back to the main pier for posting. Any hotel or guesthouse will handle it for you, and stamps can be purchased in small provision shops in beach areas.

WHERE TO STAY

Twenty years ago, there were but a few makeshift beachside bungalow compounds along the nearly deserted coast of Samui. Today, luxury resorts stand shoulder to shoulder with homey guesthouses, chic modern facilities next to motel cellblocks, all vying for supremacy over the choicest beachside real estate. Even if your budget is tight, you can still enjoy the same sand as those in the more exclusive joints.

Mae Nam Bay

Mae Nam Bay is 12km (7½ miles) from the ferry pier, at the midpoint of Samui's north shore, facing nearby Ko Pha Ngan. The beach is narrow and long, with coarse sand and shaded by trees. The water is deep enough for swimming.

Very Expensive

Santiburi Dusit Resort ★★★ The sprawling Santiburi Dusit is one of the most luxurious places to stay on the island. The resort design is influenced by late Thai royal architecture, with spacious and airy interiors—a simplicity accented with luxurious Jim Thompson Thai silks and tidy floral arrangements. The gardens and beachfront are picturesque and quiet, and the staff is motivated to please, making this one of the best resorts on the island and comparable to any of the fine properties in the kingdom. The top villas front the beach, while the others are set among lush greenery around a central pool and spa. Each bungalow is a luxe suite, with living and sleeping areas divided by glass and flowers. The bathroom is master fully outfitted in wood and black tiles, the centerpiece a large, round sunken tub. Standard features such as a video player and stereo system make each villa as convenient as your own home. Guests can take advantage of windsurfing and sailing on the house, while duffers can enjoy the only 18 holes on the island at the nearby Santiburi Country Club. The resort also has its own gorgeous Chinese junk, anchored in the bay for dinner cruises or for hiring out to tour surrounding islands. For a more affordable but equally indulgent stay, try Santiburi's sister property, **Bophut Resort & Spa,** just a short hop down the beach.

12/12 Moo 1, Tambol Mae Nam, Ko Samui 84330. ✆ **07742-5031.** Fax 07742-5040. www.santiburi.com. 71 units. 19,000B–24,000B ($543–$686/£345–£436) suite; 24,000B–47,520B ($686–$1,358/£436–£864) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; lounge; outdoor pool; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment; concierge; car rental; limo service; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player (and DVD library), stereo, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Coco Palm Resort A good budget choice, Coco Palm's bungalows are basic and comfortable. The place attracts lots of families on a budget, but is still quite peaceful. Deluxe bungalows are worth a bump-up; though still with just shower-in-room bathrooms, they are airy and have vaulted cathay ceilings. Seaside bungalows are worth the additional jump in price for their location.

26/4 Moo 4, Mae Nam Beach, Ko Samui 84330. ✆ **07724-7288.** Fax 07742-5321. www.cocopalmsamui.com. 104 units. 1,200B ($34/£22) standard; 2,100B–3,500B ($60–$100/£38–£64) deluxe; 6,000B–8,000B ($171–$229/£109–£145) villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small outdoor pool; tour desk; jeep and motorcycle rental; transfer service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, no phone.

Mae Nam Resort ★ (Value) These 36 bungalows form a secluded little village in overgrown jungle gardens with tall, lush greenery. Each has teak paneling and floors, rattan furnishings, a small bathroom with polished stone walls, and a small deck. Beachfront bungalows will have you stepping off your balcony right into the silky, palm-shaded sand for very little, considering the neighboring Santiburi Dusit Resort's beachfront villas run about 32,800B ($937/£596). Okay, so Mae Nam Resort can't compare to five-star luxury, but it's still the same sand and view.

Mae Nam Beach, Ko Samui 84330 (next to the Santiburi Dusit Resort). ✆ **07724-7287.** Fax 07742-5116. www.maenamresort.com. 41 units. 1,200B ($34/£22) double with fan; 1,600B–2,000B ($46–$57/£29–£36) double with A/C; 2,700B ($77/£49) A/C bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; jeep and motorcycle rental; transfer service; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* No phone.

Bophut Beach

Bophut Beach is on the north coast just east of Mae Nam. The beach is thin and the sand is coarse, but the little commercial strip is fun and convenient.

Moderate

Peace Resort ★★ (Kids) Owned and managed by a caring family, the Peace Resort has an ambience that justifies its name. The free-standing bungalows are really more like small luxury suites, and are particularly favored by families. All have vaulted ceilings with design schemes that are either finely crafted wood or cooler, almost Mediterranean numbers in pastel tiles with designer flat-stone masonry and smooth stucco. Spring for a larger seaside room. The central pool is not particularly large, but it's cozy and near the beach, and there's a kids' play area. There's a small, open-air restaurant where you can enjoy a cool drink, the company of good friends, and the calm of this tranquil bay with the big Buddha winking from the next beach.

Bophut Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (central Bophut). ✆ **07742-5357.** Fax 07742-5343. www.peaceresort.com. 122 units. 6,200B–11,500B ($177–$329/£113–£209) garden villa; 12,700B ($363/£231) beach-view villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa (across the road); kids' club and playground; tour desk; car and motorbike rental; limited room service (6am–11:30pm); babysitting; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, no phone.

Samrong Bay

Situated in the extreme northeast of the island, Samrong Bay is about as far away from it all as you can get on Samui.

Very Expensive

Six Senses Hideaway and Spa ★★★ Set on a gently sloping headland among 8 hectares (20 acres) of lush vegetation, this resort was proclaimed "Best in the World" by Condé Nast's Readers' Travel Awards in 2008. Those who voted for it were impressed not

only by its lovely location and environmental friendliness, but also its sophisticated ambience and extensive leisure facilities. These facilities include private pools beside most villas and suites, a spa with a comprehensive range of treatments and activities such as aquarobics, island tours, diving trips, and cooking classes. All the villas are equipped with every imaginable comfort and are attended by personal butlers, while the views are simply fabulous.

9/10 Moo 5, Baan Plai Laem, Boput, Ko Samui 84320 (northeast tip of island). ✆ **07724-5678.** Fax 07724-5671. www.sixsenses.com. 66 units. 13,400B–18,800B ($383–$537/£244–£342) villa; from 24,640B ($704/£448) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; swimming pool; gym; spa; watersports; daily excursions; diving instruction; cookery classes; library; butler service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, Wi-Fi.

Tongsai Bay

Tongsai Bay is a scenic cove dominated by the hillside Tongsai Bay resort. The beach itself is uninspiring with very rough sand, but it's quite private.

Very Expensive

The Tongsai Bay ★★ The luxe Tongsai Bay resort dominates this stunning, rocky section of coast. Built theatrically down a hillside, the white-stucco, red-tile-roofed bungalows and buildings are reminiscent of the Mediterranean, though the palm trees are pure Thai. Between the half-moon cove's rocky bookends, the coarse-sand beach invites you to idle away the days. The all-suite resort has some touches that set it apart—each unit has plenty of outdoor terrace space, with sea views or a private walled courtyard. Terrace suites have outdoor tubs, while the Tongsai Grand Villas have not only tubs but also gazebos; the Tongsai Pool Villas manage to add on a private pool to boot. The villas are designed in harmony with nature, some even with small stands of trees growing through the middle of them. You'll find plenty of spots to hide out in a hammock under a shady tree. Service is tiptop: From the landscapers to management, there is no friendlier staff on the island.

84 Moo 5, Ban Plailaem, Bophut, Ko Samui 84320 (northeast tip of island). ✆ **07724-5480.** Fax 07742-5462. Bangkok reservations office: ✆ 02381-8774; fax 0281-8772. www.tongsaibay.co.th. 85 units. 11,000B ($314/£200) beachfront suite; 14,000B ($400/£255) cottage suite; 22,000B ($629/£400) Tongsai Grand Villa; 25,000B ($714/£455) Tongsai Pool Villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; outdoor floodlit tennis court; fitness center; spa w/massage and beauty treatments; watersports equipment; tour desk; car rental; limo service; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; snooker room; small DVD library; Internet cafe. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Choeng Mon

Choeng Mon is a gracefully shaped crescent about 1km (1/2 mile) long. Palm trees shading sunbathers reach right to the water's edge; swimming is excellent, with few rocks near the central shore. Choeng Mon is isolated, but there are many good local services and transport.

Very Expensive

Sala Samui ★★ If you're on your honeymoon, anniversary, or are just in love and want to get away from it all, look no further than the Sala Samui. Pool villas offer the most privacy, with daybeds, outdoor bathrooms (use the mosquito nets in the evenings), and small pools set in a secluded courtyard. Bedrooms are minimally decorated, with whitewashed walls offset by wood trimming and furnishings. If you do decide to leave your luxury lair, the resort offers two common swimming pools and access to a lovely

part of the beach. Honeymooners are a large part of the clientele here, and the staff goes out of its way to make each couple feel welcome.

10/9 Moo 5, Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07724-5888.** Fax 07724-5889. www.salasamui.com. 69 units. $310 (£207) deluxe; $450–$900 (£300–£600) villa; $1,150 (£767) presidential villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; wine cellar; 2 outdoor pools; fitness center; spa w/massage; watersports equipment; tour desk; car rental; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Imperial Boat House Hotel ★ You've got a pretty interesting concept here—34 authentic teak rice barges have been dry-docked and converted into charming free-standing suites. The less expensive rooms in the three-story buildings are fine but not nearly as atmospheric. Hotel facilities are extensive, the beach is one of the nicest on the island, and if you can't get a boat suite, at least you can swim in the boat-shaped swimming pool.

83 Moo 5, Tambon Bophut, Ko Samui 84320 (southern part of beach). ✆ **07742-5041.** Fax 07742-5460. www.imperialhotels.com. 210 units. 7,319B ($209/£133) double; 8,076B ($231/£147) honeymoon suite; 9,506B ($271/£173) boat suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 2 outdoor pools; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

White House Beach Resort & Spa ★★ This resort in the graceful Ayutthaya style, built around a central garden with a lotus pond and swimming pool, is by far the top choice in Choeng Mon for comfort at a reasonable cost. The lobby is impeccably decorated with original Thai artwork. The spacious and elegant rooms flank a central walkway that's lined with orchids. Each house accommodates four spacious rooms, which have separate sitting areas, huge beds, fine furnishings, and large bathrooms. By the beach, there's a pool with a bar and an especially graceful teak *sala.* The resort's quality Swiss management team is very efficient and assures a pleasant stay. This is top comfort spilling onto a beautiful stretch of white-sand beach.

59/3 Moo 5, Choeng Mon Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07724-7921.** Fax 07724-5318. www.hotelthewhitehouse.com. 40 units. 5,200B–5,800B ($149–$166/£95–£105) double; 6,600B–7,000B ($189–$200/£120–£127) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa; Jacuzzi; tour desk; jeep and motorcycle rental; transfer service; massage; laundry service; library; Internet station. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Chaweng & Chaweng Noi Bays

The beaches at Chaweng are the most popular and most overdeveloped on Samui. If you came to get away from it all, go elsewhere. Still, most of the resorts here are private, cozy, affordable, and convenient to the busy strip. North Chaweng beaches are rocky; the south is better for swimming.

Expensive

Amari Palm Reef Resort & Spa ★★ This is the finest of Amari's many hotels in Thailand by virtue of the luxury suites at beachside and the comfortable design of the ocean-side pool and dining. Accommodations in the main block and new blocks across the road are not particularly luxurious, though they're very clean with parquet floors. Suites face the sea and are designed in a seamless marriage of contemporary and traditional Thai, with large decks giving way to huge glass sliders, lovely sunken seating areas, massive plush beds, and designer bathrooms with separate shower, tub, and his-and-her sinks. The rocks and coral along the beach mean you'll have to take a bit of a walk for

swimming, but the scenery is lovely, and you can expect the same high standard of service as at all Amari hotels. The resort is far enough from the Chaweng strip to be quiet and comfortable (but close enough to party). Great for families.

Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (north end of the main strip). ✆ **07742-2015.** Fax 07742-2394. www.amari.com. 187 units. 9,333B ($267/£170) superior; 11,811B ($337/£215) deluxe; 28,444B ($813/£517) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 outdoor pools; squash court; spa w/massage, Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; bike rental; kids' club; tour desk; car rental; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Coral Bay Resort ★ Far from the boom-boom bass of Chaweng but close enough to commute, the Coral Bay—a collection of large, upscale thatch bungalows—crests a picturesque hill on the northern end of Chaweng. Rooms are in rows along the hillside (a bit of trudging to get to some); each has a large balcony, some shared with adjoining rooms. The decor is lavish, with bamboo and coconut-inlaid cabinets, intricate thatch, and fine hangings; some rooms feature graphic mosaics as well: There's nothing like it on Samui. Spring for a deluxe unit with canopy bed. Bathrooms are small garden landscapes with waterfall showers and designer flat-stone masonry. The central pool area is high above the rock-and-coral beach below (not good for swimming), and large thatch pavilions house the open lobby and fine dining. Coral Bay offers a high standard of comfort and service throughout; it also provides good information on self-touring (or can make arrangements).

9 Moo 2, Bophut, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (north end of Chaweng as the road crests the first big hill). ✆ **07723-4555.** Fax 07723-4558. www.coralbay.net. 56 units. 6,850B–8,200B ($196–$234/£125–£149) deluxe bungalow; from 8,500B ($243/£155) family bungalow; all rooms add beachfront surcharge. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; pool; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; kids' club; tour desk; car rental; massage; babysitting; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms; library and video lounge; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Imperial Samui Hotel ★★ A member of the Thai-owned Imperial group, the hotel is set in a large hilltop grove of coconut palms a short drive south of busy Chaweng. You can't walk it, but it does have frequent shuttle service to town—and unlike most resorts on or near Chaweng, this one's quiet. The saltwater pool has an organic design with large boulders, a central island, and a vanishing edge overlooking the bay below: charming. Spacious rooms have balconies with sea views, lots of floral prints and rattan, large bathrooms with potted plants, and easy access (via steps) to the beach. The sprawling hillside location means a bit of hill hiking to some of the farthest rooms, but for seclusion and comfort, this is a great choice.

86 Moo 3, Ban Chaweng Noi, Ko Samui 84320 (middle of Chaweng Noi Beach). ✆ **07742-2020.** Fax 07742-2396. www.imperialhotels.com. 141 units. 9,843B ($281/£179) premier sea-facing unit; from 11,104B ($317/£202) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; 2 outdoor pools (freshwater and seawater); outdoor floodlit tennis courts; spa; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment and dive center; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; snooker and badminton. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/free in-house movies, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Poppies Samui ★★ The famed Balinese resort runs this popular annex in Samui. On the south end of busy Chaweng, Poppies is indeed an oasis. Luxury cottages, all the same, have thatch roofs and Thai-Balinese appointments. Recent renovations have brought new floors, remodeled bathrooms, and flatscreen TVs. Although rooms are set close together, they're well situated for optimum privacy. This is a popular honeymoon choice, and the service and standards throughout are tops. The central pool is small but cozy, and the hotel dining is some of the best going (see "Where to Dine," below).

P.O. Box 1, Chaweng, Ko Samui 84320 (on the south end of the Chaweng strip). ✆ **07742-2419.** Fax 07742-2420. www.poppiessamui.com. 24 units. 15,000B ($429/£273) double; rates vary depending on season. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; tour desk; limited room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Baan Chaweng ★ This is a very good midrange choice. You're right in the heart of Chaweng here, but far enough removed from the thumping bass to get a peaceful night's sleep. Quiet paths lead past rooms and bungalows, through the lovely gardens and palms of the main courtyard, to a cozy beachfront pool and restaurant. Guest rooms are comfortable and sparsely decorated, though not displeasingly so. Superior units are in modern two-story blocks farthest removed from the beach, while free-standing deluxe bungalows and villas take the prime spots and are not a bad upgrade. The hotel's restaurant, Leelawadee, has terrace seating right on the beach and serves very good seafood.

Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (middle of Chaweng Beach). ✆ **07742-2403.** Fax 07742-2404. www.baanchaweng.com. 60 units. 4,250B ($121/£77) superior; 4,850B–5,500B ($139–$157/£88–£100) villa; 7,000B–16,250B ($200–$464/£127–£295) bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; tour desk; limo service; massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Chaweng Resort ★ The Chaweng Resort consists of two columns of free-standing bungalows leading to the sea. Cottages are basic but spacious, with lots of overdone filigree. Bathrooms are plain but spotless. The larger suites are a good value for families. The grounds are nicely landscaped, the central pool is small but cozy, and there are lots of fun Thai touches and statues throughout. The carved concrete lobby is not unlike a Hindu temple (or a wedding cake). The Thai/Continental restaurant overlooks the beach. The place is not luxurious, but it's a good family choice bustling with activity.

Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (middle of Chaweng Beach). ✆ **07742-2230,** or 02651-0016 in Bangkok. Fax 07742-2378. www.chawengresort.com. 71 units. 2,600B–3,500B ($74–$100/£47–£64) double; 4,500B ($129/£82) beachfront double; 6,500B–7,000B ($186–$200/£118–£127) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; tour desk; massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Lamai Bay

The long sand beach on Lamai Bay is comparable to Chaweng's, but caters more to the young backpacker set. There are a few comfy new resorts among the budget bungalows, however, and the wide range of services, cafes, and nightlife make Lamai the best budget choice and a popular spot.

Very Expensive

Renaissance Ko Samui Resort & Spa ★★ Recently rebranded as a Marriott resort, the Renaissance is tucked away on rocky hills that rise from a quiet cove just north of Lamai's main beach. The elegant open-air lobby surrounds a flower-laden reflecting pool guarded by two imposing *chao fa* (ornamental hooks common to Thai temple roofs). At night, the staff hosts lessons on folding towels into the intricate animal figures you'll find in every room. Deluxe units, in blocks set on the highest part of the compound, are very chic with large puffy beds and tile showers leading to a raised bathtub on the balcony (with bamboo blinds for privacy). Free-standing villas descend toward the beach and boast private terraces with pools, towering vaulted ceilings, and classical Thai decor done on a grand scale. The lovely beachfront infinity pool surrounds a budding leelawadee tree; the poolside bar is a great perch for watching the dazzling sunsets.

208/1 Moo 4, T. Maret, Lamai, Ko Samui 84310 (on the northeast end of Lamai on the hilltop). ✆ **07742-9300.** Fax 07742-9333. www.marriott.com. 78 units. 12,900B ($369/£235) deluxe; from 19,400B ($554/£353) suite; from 22,000B ($629/£400) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; poolside bar; 2 outdoor pools; health club; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; watersports equipment (including free sea kayaks); tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD and CD players, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort ★ The Pavilion is more the rococo expression of a small-time mafia don's private sanctuary than "boutique," but it *is* a tidy hotel with good service. Public spaces are surrounded by lots of greenery. Suites and spa rooms have huge luxury bathrooms, some even a courtyard area where you can enjoy a Jacuzzi and shower under the stars. Off-season guests will be sure to encounter renovations, as the owner likes to present a new look each year for return customers. There's a fine spa, the small pool and dining pavilion are right on the surf, and the proximity to Lamai's nightlife is a plus for most guests.

124/24 Moo 3, Lamai Beach, Ko Samui 84310 (north end of Lamai Beach). ✆ **07742-4030.** Fax 07742-4029. www.pavilionsamui.com. 70 units. 10,000B ($286/£182) superior spa; from 12,000B ($343/£218) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa; Jacuzzi; steam bath; tour desk; car rental; transfer service; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, safe.

Moderate

Spa Samui Resorts ★ (Value) For long-term stays or just a daytime spa visit, the Spa Samui Resorts offers a "healthy good time." The popular cleansing-and-fasting series rejuvenates your system with prepared detox drinks and tablets, plus twice-daily colonic enemas. Some balk at the thought of paying $300 per week, on top of room rates, to "not eat," but it is a good, professional program. The laid-back spa resort on the sea just north of Lamai has been around for years and is still in full swing, a rustic grouping of old bungalows and open-air dining and massage pavilions, but it now has a more comfortable property in the south of Lamai, high in the hills above town, as well as new two-bedroom villas with private pools. Rooms at the new resort range from simple, affordable bungalows to large private suites with balconies. All rooms are fitted with a colonic board for daily enemas. The spa has a cozy pool, herbal steam bath in a stone grotto, massage, body wraps, and facial treatments. Classes and workshops on yoga, meditation, and massage techniques can fill your day—or you can just put your feet up, colon all sparkling clean, and have a go at that novel you've been lugging around (or writing). All of the spa services are available for day visitors as well. The vegetarian Spa Restaurant serves excellent dishes with particular care to cleansing the body (see "Where to Dine," below).

Lamai Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (just south, in the hills over Lamai Beach). ✆ **07723-0855.** Fax 07742-4126. www.thesparesorts.net. 73 units. 900B–2,500B ($26–$71/£16–£45) double; 3,500B ($100/£64) suite; 7,200B–7,700B ($206–$220/£131–£140) villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; juice bar; pool; spa; sauna; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, safe.

Laem Set Bay

Laem Set Bay is a small rocky cape on Samui's southeast coast, with dramatic scenery that has prompted the construction of a few well-known hotels.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Laem Set Inn ★★ Distinctive in a landscape of cookie-cutter high-end resorts, the Laem Set Inn sets its own standard of style, traditional luxury, and fine service in this isolated corner of paradise. This cozy hideaway on the far southern end of the island is a

collection of uniquely designed Thai suites ranging fr om r ustic thatch bungalo ws to private pool villas. S ome suites w ere constr ucted from r ural teak homes fr om outlying islands that were saved from the wrecking ball (or deser tion), moved here, and carefully rebuilt. F amily suites hav e bunk beds, priv ate bathr ooms for kids, and small dining nooks. The most ex clusive accommodations ar e the priv ate two-bedr oom suites decorated with hand-hewn furniture and a cer tain regional grace. Large por ches bookend all villas and provide a perch for drinking in vie ws beyond the pounding surf to nearby No Dog Island. Kayaks, mountain bikes, and snor kel gear are available to explor e this location's stunning scenery. Wireless Internet comes standard in all areas, free of charge. The elevated pool seamlessly blends with the gulf , r eflecting sea and sky , and the pavilion restaurant ser ves gourmet far e and delicious Thai seafood. This boutique inn is tr ue rustic luxury, far from the crowds—an ideal getaway.

110 Moo 2, Hua Thanon, Laem S et, Ko Samui 84310. ✆ **07742-4393.** Fax 07742-4394. w ww.laemset.com. 30 units. 1,200B ($34/£22) sea view bungalow with fan; 2,750B ($79/£50) seafr ont bungalow with fan; 4,350B–8,000B ($124–$229/£79–£145) standard double; from 8,150B ($233/£148) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; fitness c enter; Jacuzzi; sauna; wat ersports equipment; bike and motorcycle r ental; childr en's pr ograms; c oncierge; t our desk ; car r ental; limo ser vice; business c enter; limited r oom ser vice; massage; bab ysitting; laundr y ser vice. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, c offeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

West Coast

Very Expensive

Baan Taling Ngam Resort ★★★ Enjoying an ideal location, B aan Taling Ngam is peaceful and isolated on the w estern side of the island some 40 minutes ' drive from the Samui Airpor t. B uilt on the side of a hill, the r esort's accommodations include delux e rooms and suites, along with one- to thr ee-bedroom beach and cliff villas. The hilltop lobby and restaurant, as well as the guest rooms, have fantastic views of the sea and r esort gardens, and the main pool appears to spill over its edges into the coconut-palm grove below. Guest rooms combine Thai furnitur e, fine textiles, and louv ered wood paneling, including the sliding doors to the huge tanning terrace. Bathrooms feature oversize tubs and sophisticated black slate and wood. The two-bedroom villas afford the most v alue and conv enience for families. The resort's only drawback is that the beach is small, and while some may seek out the privacy this place promises, the cost is isolation fr om the "action" on the other par ts of the island—at least a 30-minute drive away. The resort has a fine spa, plus kayaks, windsurf boards, and mountain bikes for guests ' use, and can arrange diving trips. I nternational cuisine is ser ved at the Lom Talay, but ther e's also a choice of Thai and Asian at B aan Chantra and Sala Thai, or Mediterranean at the Promenade.

295 Moo 3, Taling Ngam Beach, Ko Samui 84140. ✆ **07742-9100.** Fax 07742-3220. w ww.baan-talingngam.com. 70 units . 8,500B–9,600B ($243–$274/£155–£175) double; 16,000B ($457/£291) suit e; 12,500B–24,500B ($357–$700/£227–£445) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; 7 pools; outdoor floodlit t ennis c ourts; fitness c enter; spa w/massage; Jacuzzi; sauna; wat ersports equipment; bike r ental; billiar ds r oom; c oncierge; t our desk ; car r ental; limo ser vice; salon; 24-hr . r oom ser vice; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Bophut Beach

Mangrove ★★ INTERNATIONAL For r omantic, elegant dining, the M angrove is the best on S amui. It's on a quiet str etch of r ural r oad (near the airpor t), and though removed from the bustling tourist ar eas such as Chaw eng, that is in fact the v ery appeal here. It's still just a short drive from Chaweng. The casual open-air dining area overlooks a

grove of mangroves, of course, and echoes with the sounds of forest and jungle. The menu changes monthly to cater to the oft-returning expat clientele. For a starter, try the crab salad and ask about any daily specials, which have included a delicious lamb chop marinated in herbs de Provence. The place is run by a friendly, young (but very experienced) French/Belgian couple who go to great lengths. Don't scrimp on dessert; try the rich chocolate mouse and follow it up with a Rum Ginger, the Mangrove's signature after-dinner drink.

32/6 Moo 4, Bophut (on the airport road btw. Bophut and Big Buddha beaches). ✆ **07742-7584.** Main courses 290B–690B ($8.30–$20/£5.25–£13). MC, V. Daily 5:30pm–last order (closed on the last 3 days of each month).

Tongsai Bay

Chef Chom's ★ THAI Even if you're not fortunate enough to stay at the Tongsai Bay resort, Chef Chom's makes a trip to this corner of the island worthwhile. Chom descends from a long line of cooks, some of whom worked in the palace kitchen of Princess Vibhavadee Rangsit in Bangkok. The menu is a mix of southern Thai (spicy) and royal Thai (sweet) cuisines and utilizes only the freshest ingredients. For a nice selection of tastes, try the Tongsai Platter, which offers six distinct dishes, including the excellent *gai hor bai toey* (chicken in pandanus leaves). The cool ocean breezes, candlelight, and soft Thai classical music in the background all make for a romantic evening.

At the Tongsai Bay resort, Moo 5, Ban Plailaem, Bophut (northeast tip of island). ✆ **07724-5480.** Reservations recommended in peak season. Main courses 150B–520B ($4.30–$15/£2.70–£9.45). AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30–10pm.

Chaweng Beach

Chaweng is where you'll find the most variety, from McDonald's to fine dining.

Betelnut ★ INTERNATIONAL At this innovative restaurant, you'll be greeted by Jeffrey Lord, owner, proprietor, and rollicking raconteur who delivers fine wit and witticisms along with excellent victuals. The delicious sesame-encrusted salmon katsu is indicative of the international fare here. The blackened tuna with salsa and the soft-shell crabs with green papaya and mango salad are also good choices. Come with friends, order a spread of dishes, and pick from among the fine wine selections for a great evening. If you're having difficulty choosing between all the appetizing alternatives, go for the five-course tasting menu, which will set you back around 1,800B ($51/£33).

Buri Rasa Village Resort, Chaweng Beach. ✆ **07741-3370.** w www.betelnutsamui.net. Main courses 475B–1,200B ($14–$34/£8.60–£22). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm.

Poppies ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Known for its Balinese flair, Poppies is equally famous for fresh seafood by the beach. The romantic atmosphere under the large thatch pavilion is enhanced by soft lighting and live international jazz music. Though it specializes in fresh seafood, the kitchen also offers international and Thai classics, as well as a sizable vegetarian menu. Thai dishes are tempered to the Western palate, but say *Ow pet* ("I want it spicy"), and chef Wantanee will crank up the heat for you.

South Chaweng Beach. ✆ **07742-2419.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 220B–1,150B ($6.30–$33/£4–£21). AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–midnight.

Vechia Napoli ★ ITALIAN Listen to the dulcet tones of quiet Italian folk music and watch lazy fans languidly churn cool air as you lean back in a rattan chair; you might think you've been transported to a small town in rural Napoli, and the simple authentic cuisine of this restaurant completes the picture. Tomato and mozzarella with a splash of pesto, a glass of red, and good conversation; you won't believe you're just a stone's throw

from busy Chaw eng (down a little alley with seedy massage places and bars, but that somehow lends to the atmosphere). You'll find it all here: great pastas, grilled specials, pizzas, and the house special—shellfish soup with king prawns, fresh crab, mussels, and clams done in a special Neapolitan broth. Follow it up with a real gelato or tiramisu and espresso.

166/31 Moo 2 (aka Soi Starbucks), in central Chaweng. ✆ **07723-1229.** Main courses 200B–580B ($5.70–$17/£3.60–£11). MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Lamai Beach

Spa Restaurant VEGETARIAN This place is not just about veggies (you'll find a few seafood and chicken dishes as well); it's for anyone who'd like to enjoy a healthful, tasty dish. Go for the delicious curries, or try one of the excellent local dishes. But leave plenty of time for an herbal steam and massage at the health center, too.

Rte. 4169, btw. Chaweng and Lamai beaches. ✆ **07723-0855.** Reservations recommended in peak season. Main courses 50B–370B ($1.40–$11/90p–£6.70). MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Busy Samui supports all kinds of activities, from scuba diving to bungee jumping, jungle trekking to cooking schools. Most folks come here for beach fun and frolic, and you'll find all kinds of such activities—sailing, jet skis, and parasailing—right at beachside.

The gold-tiled **Wat Phrayai (Big Buddha),** more than 24m (79 ft.) tall, sits atop Ko Faan (Barking Deer Island), a small islet connected to the shore by a dirt causeway almost 305m (1,000 ft.) long. Though of little historic value, it's an imposing presence on the northeast coast and is one of Samui's primary landmarks. It's open all day; a 20B (55¢/35p) donation is recommended. It's easy to reach: Just hop on any *songtao* going to Big Buddha Beach. You can't miss it.

Ko Samui's famed **Wonderful Rocks**—the most important of which are the unique **Hin Ta** and **Hin Yai,** or Grandfather and Grandmother Stones, shaped like the male and female sexual organs—are at the far southern end of Lamai Beach. To get there, flag down any *songtao* to Lamai Beach.

The **Mummified Monk** at Wat Khunaram is certainly worth a visit if you're bent on seeing roadside oddities. He died in the meditation mudra, legs folded lotus style, and was embalmed that way; you can see him behind glass in a small pavilion at the right as you enter **Wat Khunaram,** itself a worthy example of a typical Thai town temple. At the entrance to the monks' pavilion, a few coins are the cost of the resident monk's blessing with water. Take off your shoes, smile, and kneel, and he will put water on your head and give you a blessing. The *wat* is along the main road, Route 4169, as it shoots inland far south of Lamai.

The **Samui Monkey Theater** (✆ **07724-5140**) is just south of Bophut village on 4169 Road. A vaudeville-style act demonstrates how monkeys collect coconuts—more fun for kids than for adults. Showtimes are 10:30am, 2pm, and 4pm daily; the cost is 150B ($4.30/£2.70) for adults, 50B ($1.40/90p) for children.

Samui's **snake farm** is at the far southwest corner of the island on 4170 Road (✆ **07742-3247**), with daily shows at 11am and 2pm; tickets cost 250B ($7.15/£4.55).

For daily Thai cooking and fruit-carving lessons, the **Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts (SITCA; ✆ 07741-3172;** www.sitca.net) is a professional operation and a great way to have fun—especially if your beach plans get rained out. Lunch and dinner courses cost 1,950B ($56/£35) each.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

KAYAKING **Blue Stars Sea Kayaking,** 169/1 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach Road (✆ **07723-0497;** www.bluestars.info), is easy to contact through most booking agents and takes people to the Mu Ko Ang Thong National Marine Park for kayaking and snorkeling. The rubber canoes are perfect for exploring the caverns beneath limestone cliffs. The full-day trip costs 2,200B ($63/£40) for adults, 1,400B ($40/£25) for children.

SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELING Local aquanauts agree that the best scuba diving is off **Ko Tao,** a small island northof Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Samui, and many of the operations on Samui coordinate with larger on-site dive centers there while also offering good day trips from Samui. Conditions vary with the seasons (Oct–Mar are the best months). The cluster of tiny islands northwest of Samui, **Mu Ko Ang Thong National Marine Park,** is often a more reliable destination. Follow the advice of a local dive shop on where to go, as many have schools on Samui and offer trips farther afield. You can try **Samui International Diving School** (✆ **07742-2386** in Chaweng; www.planet-scuba.netr), with eight locations around the island; **Easy Divers** (✆ **07724-5026**); or **Big Blue** (✆ **07742-2617**).

THE SPA SCENE

Traditional massage is available in any number of storefronts in Chaweng and everywhere along the beach. Expect to pay between 200B and 400B ($5.70–$11/£3.60–£7.25) per hour for services.

Ban Sabai, at Big Buddha Beach (✆ **07724-5175;** www.ban-sabai.com), is a great choice for a relaxing seaside massage. It offers all treatments, from aromatherapy to body waxing, in its lush, Thai-style compound. Personal attention is this spa's hallmark, and the well-informed staff can tailor a program to your every need. Treatments start at 1,200B ($34/£22) for a 1-hour massage. There is another branch at Baan Taling Ngam Beach on the west coast.

The **Spa Resort,** in Lamai (✆ **07723-0855;** www.spasamui.com), has been a leader on the island for years and continues to provide good, affordable day programs, as well as its signature fasting retreat and all-inclusive packages. **Tamarind Retreat** (✆ **07742-4221;** www.tamarindretreat.com) is a more exclusive (and expensive) choice set apart in a jungle area just off the beach at Lamai.

KO SAMUI AFTER DARK

Any given evening along the Chaweng strip is certain to be disrupted at least a few times by roaming pickup trucks with crackling PA systems blaring out advertisements in Thai and English for local **Thai boxing** bouts. Grab one of their flyers for times and locations, which vary.

For bars and discos, Chaweng is the place to be. A mainstream kind of fun seems to always be happening at the **Reggae Pub** (indicated on just about every island map—back from the main road around the central beach area). In this huge thatch mansion, the stage thumps with funky international acts, the dance floor jumps (even during low season, it does a booming business), and the upstairs pool tables are good for sporting around. Just outside is a collection of open-air bars, also found along Chaweng's beach road. The **Green Mango** has its own street, just off the beachfront road in the northern end of Chaweng, and boom-boom-booms late every night as the town's number-one dance location. A good place to meet that special someone or two.

Most beachside bars consist of a younger backpacker crowd lounging on cushions in the sand. Of these, the **Ark Bar** (✆ **07742-2047**), across from the Center Point shopping center, is the most happening. The Irish-owned **Tropical Murphy's** (✆ **07741-3614**), across from McDonald's in south Chaweng, is indeed a slice of Ireland along the Chaweng strip. It's always full and open late; it's the best place to have a friendly pint and be assured you won't have to scream over the thumping bass of house music. Good Irish bands visit from time to time.

Zico's (✆ **07723-1560**), a Brazilian restaurant, has a slick, big-city kind of bar that will be a comfort to any Hollywood-style players who miss their playground. Zico's modern facade looks over the busy main drag in the south of Chaweng near the Central Resort compound. **Coco Blues Company** (✆ **07741-4354**), on the north end of Chaweng's main drag, hosts nightly live music, either the house band or an international acts, and also serves decent Cajun food.

Over at Lamai Beach, there are some open-air bars geared to budget backpackers, but many are the sleazier bar-beer variety. On Bophut Beach, be sure to stop by friendly and laid-back **Frog & Gecko Bar** (in Fisherman's Village; ✆ **07742-5248**), especially for its popular pub quiz on Wednesday evenings.

Sunday afternoons, be sure to truck on over to the **Secret Garden Pub** ★★, on Big Buddha Beach (✆ **07724-5255**), for live music and a barbecue on the beach. Many a famous performer (Gerry played here, man!) has jumped up on stage, and there have been times when the pub has hosted thousands. It's not exactly "secret," but still highly recommended. Festivities usually kick off around 5pm.

SIDE TRIPS FROM KO SAMUI

Mu Ko Ang Thong National Marine Park ★

Forty islands northwest of Ko Samui have been designated a national park. Mu Ko Ang Thong National Marine Park is known for its scenic beauty and rare coral reefs. Many of these islands are limestone rock towers (similar to Phang Nga Bay off Phuket), once used by pirates marauding in the South China Sea.

You can book a private boat from Nathon Pier, or you can take a day trip via sea kayak, paddling through the scenery for better views. The latter runs about 2,200B ($63/£40) with **Blue Stars Sea Kayaking** (see "Outdoor Activities," above).

13 KO PHA NGAN

75km (47 miles) E of Surat Thani

Visible from Ko Samui and about two-thirds its size, with similar terrain and flora, Ko Pha Ngan has some beautiful beaches and, along the farther reaches of the island—the rugged north and west coasts, accessible only by bumpy road or special boat—a few cozy resorts and a measure of rustic tranquillity.

The southeastern peninsula of **Haad Rin** is the locus of the monthly **Full Moon Party,** a multiday beachside rave with all the Day-Glo, strobe lights, and debauchery you can handle; attendance at the raves, especially in high season, numbers in the thousands. Partyers move to the mix of a European DJ, gobbling tabs of Ecstasy and magic mushrooms, and letting loose, very loose: something like Ibiza meets a Phish show at the beach. The aftermath of the party is a beautiful white-sand beach strewn with party garbage and buzzing with flies.

Warning! Just Say "Mai!"

"Mai" means "no." Thai authorities hope to put a stop to Haad Rin's monthly Full Moon Parties (and other "Half-Moon" and "No-Moon" excuses to rave). This means undercover drug busts by the very guy who just sold you that bag of oregano and bribing your way out of police custody.

If you're interested in attending, boats from Ko Samui leave at regular intervals all day and night (stopping at around 1am), and many revelers just make a night of it, crash on the beach, and come back to Samui in the morning. ***A word of warning:*** Beware of theft at Full Moon Parties—do yourself a favor, and lock all your valuables in a hotel safe.

GETTING THERE

BY BOAT Frequent boats link Surat Thani, Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Tao, and Chumphon. From Samui's Nathon Pier, the trip to Ko Pha Ngan takes just more than an hour and costs 220B ($6.30/£4). Contact **Songserm,** in Ko Samui (✆ **07742-0157**). Special boats from Samui's Big Buddha Beach and Bophut Beach also make regular trips for 100B ($2.85/£1.80), more during Full Moon Parties at inflated rates. ***Note:*** Unfortunately, the muster point in Pha Ngan is not well organized, just a bare pier and one gruff attendant. Come armed with the patience of Buddha, especially anytime near the full moon.

GETTING AROUND

Jeep and **motorbike** rentals on Ko Pha Ngan are available anywhere in Haad Rin or near the ferry pier at Thong Sala, on the southwest coast. Jeeps start at 900B ($26/£16); regular motorbikes go for 200B ($5.70/£3.60) and up. The island roads are steep and treacherous, especially the popular southern reaches east of Thong Sala near Haad Rin. Many interior roads, including the trek to the secluded Thong Nai Pan area in the north, are hilly, muddy tracks. ***Songtao*** follow regular routes between Thong Sala ferry pier and Haad Rin, as well as up the west coast; rides start at 50B ($1.40/90p), more at night or during party time.

FAST FACTS: KO PHA NGAN

There are branches of **Siam City Bank,** with exchange and ATM services, along both the main street of Thong Sala and in Haad Rin. **Internet access** is chockablock around the island; prices are 1B to 2B (1¢–5¢/1p–5p) per minute. The **tourist police** operate a small information kiosk on the north end of the ferry offices at Thong Sala pier; call ✆ **07742-1281** for info or ✆ **1155** in an emergency.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Cheap eats abound in busy Haad Rin, but your best bet for a good meal outside of your resort is limited to mostly budget storefronts blaring DVD movies at high decibels. One bright spot is **Om Ganesh** (✆ **07737-5123**), near the main ferry pier. It has great curries and set menus (all-you-can-eat Indian *thali* meals) for little: authentic, delicious, and very popular.

Ban Tai Beach

Just east of the ferry landing at Thong Sala, Ban Tai Beach is a quiet stretch of sand on the island's southwest coast. The water is shallow and not great for swimming, but the beaches are lovely, and there are a few convenient little resorts far from the hubbub of Haad Rin but close enough to visit. Try **First Villa** (145/1 Moo 1, Ban Tai Beach; ✆ **07737-7225;** www.firstvilla.com), with basic bungalows from 1,020B ($29/£19), or nearby **Mac Bay Resort** (Ban Tai Beach; ✆ **07723-8443**), with a similar plain standard and rates.

Haad Rin

Haad Rin is a narrow peninsula on the island's southeast tip, with a large number of bungalows on both the west and east sides and busy shopping streets and footpaths leading between them. There are lots of small bungalow resorts, all quite basic. On the busier west side, try **Phangan Buri Resort & Health Spa** (120/1 Haad Rin Nai Beach, Haad Rin; ✆ **07737-5481**), with superior rooms from 2,900B ($83/£53). Or check out hilltop **Sea Breeze Bungalow** (94/11 Moo 6, Haad Rin; ✆ **07737-5419**), a quiet, lofty perch high enough above town for a bit of quiet but close enough to walk down and join the festivities. Rooms with air-conditioning start at 1,500B ($43/£27; rates double at full moon times).

The **Sanctuary** (P.O. Box 3, Ko Pha Ngan 84280; ✆ **08127-13614;** www.thesanctuarythailand.com) bills itself as an alternative boutique resort. It offers all kinds of healthy activities such as yoga, massage, and fasting programs. Accommodations range from 120B ($3.40/£2.20) for dorms to family houses starting at 1,500B ($43/£27). You'll need to arrange a taxi boat from Haad Rin to Haad Tien (50B/$1.40/90p).

Northeast Coast

Secluded on its own stretch of beach 17km (11 miles) from the ferry pier and north of busy Haad Rin, this area features great beaches with a few budget stops as well as the island's best resorts. Thong Nai Pan is a scenic choice, easily reached by boat (contact Panviman) or, less easily, by bumpy dirt road. **Panviman** ★ (22/1 Moo 5, Thong Nai Pan Noi Bay; ✆/fax **07744-5101;** www.panviman.com) is one of the best hotels on Pha Ngan and has picturesque rooms overlooking the bay, lots of services, and a tiered pool area. Another comfortable option is the **Santhiya Resort & Spa** (22/7 Moo 5, Banthai; ✆ **07742-8999;** www.santhiya.com), where the teak villas are scattered among 18 acres of grounds and deluxe rooms start at 12,000B ($343/£218).

Northwest Coast

The northwest coast has good beaches and is far from the monthly "do" at Haad Rin, a relief for many. Resorts here are quiet, affordable, and growing in number and quality of amenities. **Green Papaya** (Haad Salad, on the far northwest of the island; ✆/fax **07737-4230;** www.greenpapayaresort.com) is a mellow little courtyard hotel with rooms from 4,600B ($131/£84). The next-door **Salad Beach Resort** (✆ **07734-9274;** www.phangan-saladbeachresort.com) also has smart rooms at slightly cheaper rates.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The rugged roads of Pha Ngan beg to be explored, and interior roads connect small towns worth seeing as a window into a way of laid-back island living that is slowly disappearing.

Wat Kow Tahm ★ is a well-known international meditation center and temple compound just north of the road near Thong Sala pier. Since 1988, Steve and Rosemary

Weissmann (from the U.S. and Australia, respectively) have been offering courses in Insight Meditation, or Vipassana. The emphasis is on the development of compassionate understanding through the practice of formal walking and sitting meditation. There are frequent Dharma talks and 10- and 20-day retreats for meditators of all experience levels; prices start at 4,500B ($129/£82) for 10 days. The temple is also open to day visitors and has an overlook with one of the best views on the island. Check the informative website at www.watkowtahm.org, or address inquiries to Retreats, Wat Kow Tahm, P.O. Box 18, Ko Pah Ngan, Surat Thani 84280.

14 KO TAO

Tiny Ko Tao developed differently from its neighbors—it skipped the slow-growth years of thatch shacks and candlelit meals and went straight to corrugated tin roofs and video-playing bars. There are still lots of rustic choices on the island, but the current trend is small, all-inclusive resorts owned and operated by dive companies with head offices in Samui and elsewhere. Visitors spend their days out on the water on **scuba tours** to the fine coral sites around the island, then return to the comfort of private bungalows where they can relax and debrief after the day's exploration (many of these places even have air-conditioned classrooms for studying diving specifics). Avoid Ko Tao in the stormy November-to-December season, when the monsoon whips up and winds cloud the normally transparent seas.

Songserm (✆ **07742-0157** on Ko Samui, 07750-6205 in Chumphon, or 07745-6274 on Ko Tao) connects from nearby islands. From Chumphon, the fare is a steep 450B ($13/£8.20); from Ko Samui, 400B ($11/£7.25); and from Ko Pha Ngan, 250B ($7.15/£4.55). Once you get to the main town, you'll find scuba operators and accommodations booking offices.

For advance booking with a dive service, contact a dive office such as **Big Blue Diving Ko Tao** (in Mae Haad; ✆ **07745-6415;** www.bigbluediving.com) or **Easy Divers** (in Mae Haad at the catamaran jetty; ✆ **07745-6010;** www.thaidive.com).

15 THE FAR SOUTH & ON TO MALAYSIA

From Surat Thani going south, Thailand slowly gives way to Malay culture; Buddhism, predominant elsewhere in the kingdom, is replaced by rich Islamic influence, a gradual process without any precise border. **Nakhon Si Thammarat** is an ancient Buddhist city of note with many temples worth visiting. The far southern **Hat Yai** is a major transport hub and a destination more popular with Malay and Singaporean tourists, mostly a stopover for onward travel to (or connecting from) Malaysia.

Warning: Bomb attacks have targeted tourist areas in Hat Yai: In April 2005, a bomb was set off in Hat Yai International Airport, killing two, and in September 2006, six separate bombs killing four people, including a Canadian, were detonated in downtown Hat Yai. While these were isolated events, and most of the violence occurs farther south in the border areas with Malaysia, caution is advised if you plan on using Hat Yai as a transit point.

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

Nakhon Si Thammarat, one of the oldest cities in southern Thailand, has long been a religious capital. **Wat Mahathat** houses a hair of the Buddha and is the town's central attraction and important pilgrimage point for Thai Buddhists. This region is the locus for traditional Thai puppet play, and **Ban Nang Thalung Suchart Subsin** (Mr. Subsin's House of Shadow Plays), 110/18 Si Thammasok Soi 3 (✆ **07534-6394**), makes for an interesting visit.

Thai Airways and **PB Air** both connect Nakhon with Bangkok. All north-south **trains** make a stop here, and affordable **minivans** can be arranged from any hotel (the best way to get around the south).

Thai Hotel (1375 Ratchadamnoen Rd.; ✆ **07534-1509**) is a basic and convenient standard lodging, with fan rooms starting at 260B ($7.40/£4.70).

HAT YAI

It's a town full of tourists behaving badly, mostly men from nearby Malaysia and Singapore attracted by this rowdy, slightly sleazy, inexpensive, consumer playground. For Westerners, Hat Yai is mostly a gateway to Malaysia by train or bus, or a stepping-off point for rugged Tarutao National Park. Hat Yai's busy **Night Market** is certainly worth a wander, and the beaches at nearby **Songkhla** are not a bad day trip.

Hat Yai International Airport welcomes frequent flights from Malaysia and Singapore via Silk Air, Malaysia Airlines, and Thai Airways, and there are connections available to Bangkok and Phuket.

Five trains depart daily from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334) to Hat Yai, which is a major rail hub, and there are daily connections with Malaysia. Minibuses connect from other parts of the region, and long-distance buses connect from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02894-6122**).

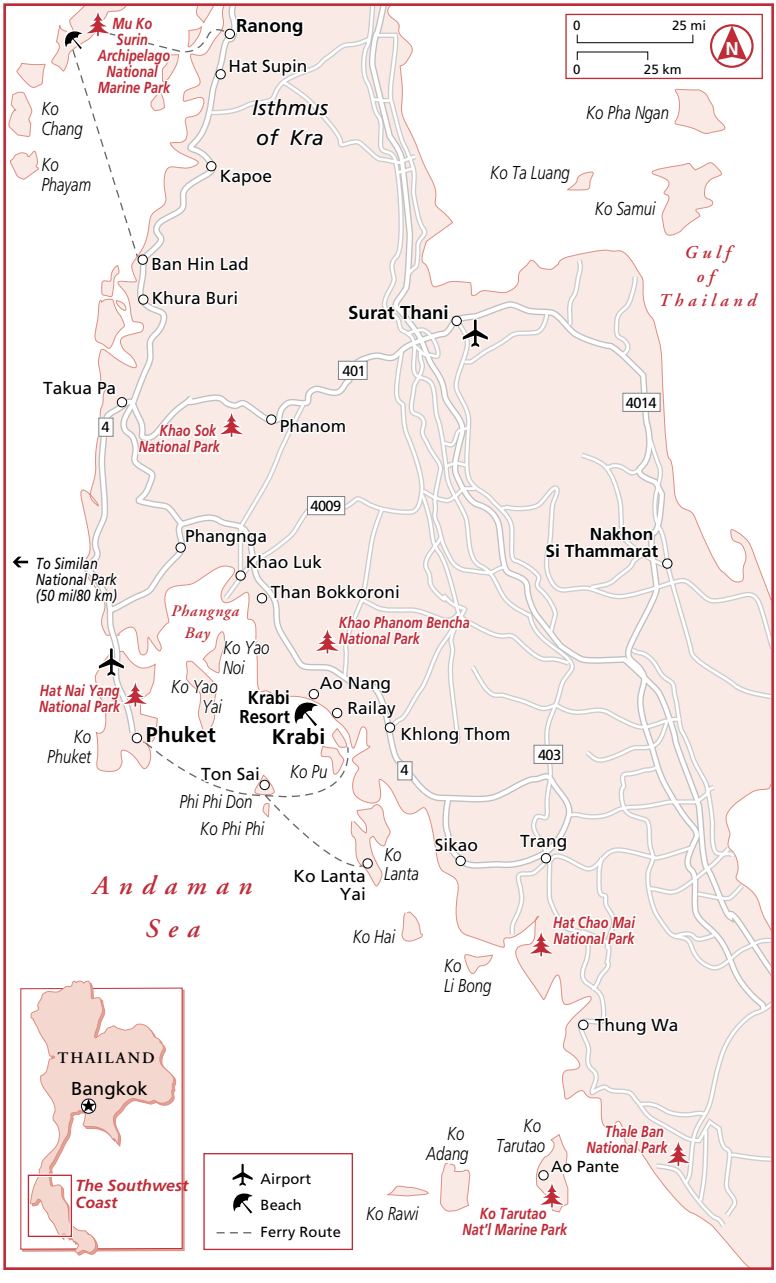
A number of fine hotels cater to Malay tourists. Try the **Novotel Centara** (3 Sanehanusom Rd.; ✆ **07435-2222**), with rooms from 3,800B ($109/£69), or the popular backpacker haunt, **Cathay Guest House** (93/1 Niphat Uthit 2 Rd.; ✆ **07424-3815**), with singles from 160B ($4.55/£2.90).

Hat Yai is also the gateway to **Tarutao National Park,** a chain of 51 islands originally settled by sea gypsies and later used as prison colonies.The jumping-off point for Tarutao is Ban Pak Bara, a port city reached by bus from Hat Yai.

16 AN INTRO TO THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

This stunning length of coast, dotted by some of the finest resorts in the region, is now well known for the tragic events of December 2004, when a massive tsunami struck the shores here, leaving a path of destruction. Many lives were lost and this long, heavily populated coast was left in ruins. Today, there are few signs left of the destruction, as resorts were quick to rebuild and remodel post-tsunami. In the unlikely event of another tsunami, the government has installed an early warning system, and evacuation routes to high ground are well marked.

The island of **Phuket** was one of the earliest tourist developments in the kingdom, and from humble origins has grown into a top international resort area: the best choice for comfort and services on the west coast. Phuket may be Thailand's largest and best known island, though it is but one of many in the brilliant blue Andaman Sea; rocky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Ko Adang
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Ko Rawi
Ko Tarutao Nat'l Marine Park
THAILAND
Bangkok
The Southwest Coast
Airport
Beach
Ferry Route

islets, atolls, and leafy jungle coastline play host to a roster of island resorts and getaways. It is a great area to island-hop via bus and ferry connections, and there are opportunities for snorkeling, trekking, and laid-back luxury in every quarter.

The province of **Krabi** encompasses all the land east of Phuket, including Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lanta, but "Krabi" typically refers to the small port town and nearby beaches of the Krabi Resort area and Ao Nang Beach. In places such as Railay Beach, you'll find dynamic stone-tower landscapes (popular among rock climbers), great beaches, and a range of resorts. It's a popular alternative to busy Phuket.

About equidistant from Krabi and Phuket, the island of **Ko Phi Phi** followed Phuket's development model, though on a smaller scale. Phi Phi was hit hard by the tsunami, but has quickly been rebuilt.

Ko Lanta is a large island southeast of Krabi Town. Once lined only with budget resorts and bungalows, it now hosts a number of luxury resorts with more under construction.

The high season on the west coast is from November to April—bookings must be made in advance, especially on Phuket, and discounted rates are hard to come by. Still, western winter months are the time for water activities, when the Andaman is calm and the skies clear (and when the snow falls thick in many parts of the world). In superpeak season, from the Christmas holiday to about January 10, most places tack on steep surcharges.

17 PHUKET ★★★

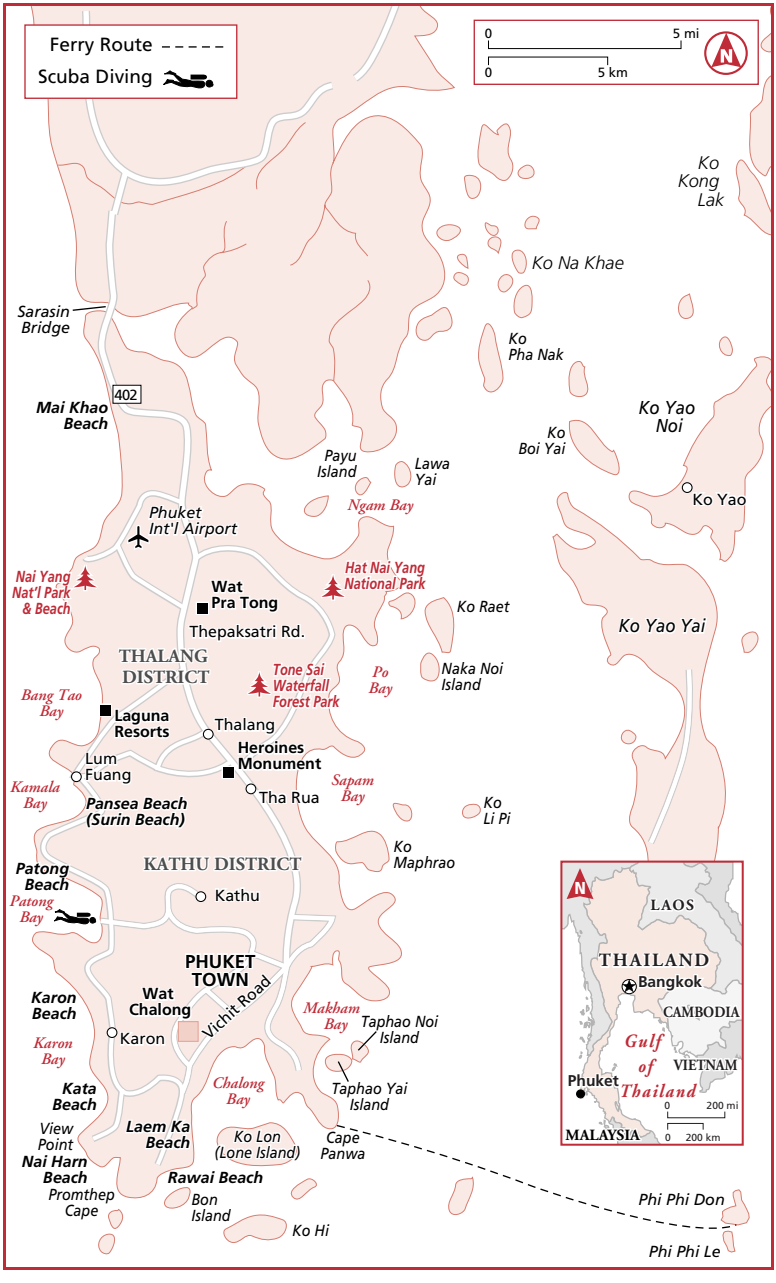
At its best, this island in the Andaman Sea is idyllic: It has long sandy beaches (some with dunes), warm water, excellent snorkeling and scuba diving off Ko Similan, good windsurfing conditions, mountains, fine resorts, and some of the best seafood in all of Thailand. At its worst, it is overdeveloped and overrun with tour groups; its raucous nightlife and areas such as busy Patong's pulsing commercial strip can be a bit too much for those in search of beachside tranquillity.

Over the years, the Thai government has granted economic incentives to encourage developers to shape the island into an international first-class resort. The 2004 tsunami was merely a speed bump, development-wise, as today construction continues to spread to previously remote beaches, and tourism numbers are back to pretsunami days. As groups pour in from Singapore, Hong Kong, and Europe, the backpackers head off to nearby Ko Phi Phi and Krabi, or to islands on the eastern gulf such as Samui and Pha Ngan.

But many of the resorts are attractive and elegant and designed to give you the illusion of tropical solitude in busier areas. It's nearly impossible to find a totally secluded beach, but there are a number of very attractive and comfortable facilities with a high level of service—not a bad trade-off for those in search of all the luxuries. If on a family holiday, Phuket is a good choice.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111** in Bangkok for domestic reservations) flies at least 10 times daily from Bangkok, from 7am to 9:30pm (trip time: 1 hr., 20 min.), and has a daily flight from Chiang Mai (trip time: 2 hr.). It also connects Phuket with international flights to and from Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Perth, Singapore, and Tokyo. The local Thai Airways office in Phuket is at 78 Ranong Rd. ✆ **07621-1195** for domestic, or 07621-2499 for international).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Wat Pra Tong
Hat Nai Yang National Park
Ko Raet
Thepaksatri Rd.
Ko Yao Yai
THALANG DISTRICT
Tone Sai Waterfall Forest Park
Po Bay
Naka Noi Island
Bang Tao Bay
Laguna Resorts
Thalang
Heroines Monument
Lum Fuang
Kamala Bay
Tha Rua
Sapam Bay
Pansea Beach (Surin Beach)
Ko Li Pi
Ko Maphrao
KATHU DISTRICT
Patong Beach
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PHUKET TOWN
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Kata Beach
View Point
Laem Ka Beach
Ko Lon (Lone Island)
Cape Panwa
Nai Harn Beach
Rawai Beach
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Silk Air (✆ **076304018-20**) has daily connections with Singapore.

Bangkok Airways (✆ **02265-5555** in Bangkok, or 07742-2512 on Ko Samui) connects Phuket with both Ko Samui and Bangkok at least twice daily. The Bangkok Airways office in Phuket is at 158/2–3 Yaowarat Rd., Phuket Town (✆ **07622-5033,** or 07620-5401 at Phuket Airport).

Phuket Airlines (✆ **02679-8999;** www.phuketairlines.com), **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999;** www.airasia.com), and **Nok Air** (✆ **02627-2000;** www.nokair.com) all connect Phuket with Bangkok daily.

The attractive, modern **Phuket International Airport** (✆ **07732-7230-7;** www.phuketairportonline.com) is in the north of the island, about a 40-minute drive from town or from Patong Beach. It has banks, money-changing facilities, car-rental agents (see "Getting Around," below), and a post office. The Phuket Tourist Business Association booth can help you make hotel arrangements if you haven't booked a room in advance.

Many resorts will pick you up at the airport upon request for a fee, usually steep, though some include this with your rate. However, there are many options for getting to your hotel from the airport. The cheapest way is the **minibus,** which operates every hour on the hour from 9am to 11pm daily. Stopping between Patong, Kata, Karon, and Phuket Town, prices run from 80B to 180B ($2.30–$5.15/£1.45–£3.25), depending on how far you're going (180B gets you as far south as Kata Beach). **Taxi** service from the airport will cost between 400B ($11/£7.25) to Phuket Town and 650B ($19/£12) to Kata Beach. The **airport bus** connects with Phuket Town and costs 85B ($2.40/£1.55). Buses depart roughly every hour from 6:30am to 9:30pm.

BY BUS Three air-conditioned 24-seat VIP buses leave daily from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02435-1195**), best as an overnight, and cost from 1,045B ($30/£19). Regular air-conditioned buses cost 541B ($15/£9.80). Standard buses make frequent connections to Surat Thani and nearby towns on the mainland (trip time from Surat: 6 hr.; 200B/$5.70/£3.60).

The intercity bus terminal (Phangnga Rd.; ✆ **07621-1977**) is east of Phuket Town just opposite the Royal Phuket City Hotel. For information on how to get from here to the beaches, see "Getting Around," below.

BY MINIVAN Minivans to and from Surat Thani, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Ranong, and other southern cities leave on regular schedules throughout the day. In each city, minivan operators work with the hotels and arrange free pickup, so it's best to book through your hotel front desk or a travel agent (especially since the operators who man the phones at minivan companies rarely speak English). Tickets from destinations in the south, such as Surat Thani and Hat Yai, go for between 200B and 350B ($5.70–$10/£3.60–£6.35).

GETTING AROUND

Public transportation is a problem on Phuket that never seems to get solved. If you've spent any time in other parts of the country, you'll know that the covered pickup trucks that cruise the streets picking up and dropping off passengers are called *songtao,* while the noisy motorized three-wheel demons are known as tuk-tuks—not so on Phuket. Here, the people call the minitrucks **tuk-tuks,** while ***songtao*** are the giant colorful buses that ply the main roads (a few people also call them **baht buses**). Tuk-tuk drivers, in an attempt to generate more business, have lobbied successfully for exclusive rights to transport people *between* beaches, the lone exception being between Kata and Karon. This means the *songtao* are only permitted to travel from each beach to Phuket Town—you

can't hop from beach to beach on them. For these trips, you have to negotiate with the tuk-tuk drivers (see below for tips).

BY SONGTAO The local bus terminal is in front of the Central Market on Ranong Road in Phuket Town. Fares to the most popular beaches range from 20B to 30B (55¢–85¢/35p–55p). *Songtao* leave when full, usually every 30 minutes, from 7am to 6pm between Phuket Town and the main beaches on the west coast. Other than the route through Karon and Kata beaches, they do not operate routes between beaches.

BY TUK-TUK & DAIHATSU MINI Within Phuket Town, tuk-tuk trucks cost about 20B to 40B (55¢–$1.15/35p–70p) for in-town trips: a good way to get to the bus station or to Phuket Town's restaurants. In the west-coast beaches, tuk-tuks and small Daihatsu minitrucks roll around town honking at any tourist on foot, especially in Patong, and charge more, about 200B ($5.70/£3.60) from Patong Beach to Karon Beach, with higher prices late at night.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI Drivers, identifiable by colored vests, make short trips in Phuket Town or along Patong Beach for 20B to 40B (55¢–$1.15/35p–70p).

BY CAR Self-driving is popular on Phuket, but extreme caution applies. Roads between the main beaches in the west and connecting with Phuket Town across the center of the island are dangerously steep and winding, with more than a few hairpin turns, lots of traffic, and motorbikes zipping around unpredictably. As in other parts of the kingdom, drivers pass aggressively, even on blind curves, so you need to be very defensive and alert at all times.

Avis has a counter at Phuket Airport (✆ **07635-1243;** www.avisthailand.com). Plan on spending around 1,100B ($31/£20) per day for a Toyota Soluna. **Budget** (✆ **07620-5396**) is a bit cheaper; it has an airport location as well as a counter at the Patong Merlin Hotel (44 Taweewong Rd., Patong). Both companies offer sedans, and both also have sound insurance coverage available, which is highly recommended.

BY MOTORCYCLE Also along the Patong strip, the same car-rental guys will provide you with a bike for cheap. A 100cc Honda scooter goes for 200B ($5.70/£3.60) per day, while a 400cc Honda CBR or a 600cc Honda Shadow chopper will set you back at least 600B ($17/£11) per day. Significant discounts can be negotiated if you plan to rent for a longer time. Wear your helmet (there are sometimes-enforced fines of 500B/$14/£9.10 for going without), keep to the left, and let cars pass. Exercise caution: You're sure to meet up with a few road-rashed travelers in any beach area, and there is no quicker way to end a vacation than on slippery, treacherous roads, especially for inexperienced riders.

Tips Special Event

If you are on Phuket in October, don't miss the **Vegetarian Festival,** a colorful tradition passed down from early Thai-Chinese settlers. For 9 days, not only do devotees refrain from meat consumption, but many also submit to physical self-mutilation through walking over coals and practicing extreme body-piercing with long skewers or swords, all acts of merit making and penance to the spirits who helped early inhabitants ward off malaria. Early morning processions follow through the streets of Phuket Town, with onlookers clad in white for the occasion.

ISLAND LAYOUT

Phuket Town, the island's commercial center, is in the southeast. Picturesque stretches of sand dot the western coast from Nai Harn, on the southern tip, to Bang Tao, about 30km (19 miles) north. Beginning in the south, you'll find Kata Noi, Kata, Karon, Patong, Surin, and a number of smaller beaches all along this corridor. A busy coastal road links the popular tour towns in the south, but destinations north of Patong require short detours from the main highway. Inland Phuket, with its winding mountain roads, buzzes with traffic, and many visitors rent vehicles to tour the island's smaller byways or make the trip to jungle parks such as Khao Phra Thaeo National Park in the northeast, famed for diverse flora and fauna.

THE BEACHES There's a beach for everyone in Phuket, from exclusive hideaways with luxury hotels to backpacker towns and even campgrounds. Each beach is distinct—selecting the appropriate area makes all the difference.

Nai Harn Beach, in the far south of the busy west coast of Phuket, is an isolated area with a few fine resorts. Going north from here, you'll find **Kata Beach, Kata Noi Beach,** and **Karon Beach.** Developed but not overwhelmingly so (far from over-the-top Patong), these beaches are home to resorts large and small. Sandy beaches are long and picturesque; the water is deep, with some nice wave breaks. This beach area has more restaurants than the remote bays, and some shopping, nightlife, and travel-agent options as well. But you won't find rowdy crowds here—and even with all the development, the area manages to maintain a laid-back character.

North of Kata and Karon bays, you'll pass through **Relax Bay,** a small cove with a few resorts, before rolling down the mountain to **Patong Beach,** the most famous (perhaps infamous) strip on the island. Patong's draw is its raucous nightlife, busy shops and restaurants, and brash neon-radiating pulse: Can you hear the bass? Accommodations run the gamut here.

Farther north from Patong, **Kamala Bay, Surin Beach,** and **Pansea Beach** have more secluded resorts on lovely beaches for those who still want the convenience of nearby Patong, but cherish the serenity of a quiet resort. Just north is **Bang Tao Beach,** home to the Laguna Resort Complex of luxury hideaways. Beautiful **Hat Nai Yang National Park** is a remote area with good diving, just north of Laguna, and, in the far north are **Mai Khao Beach** and the JW Marriott.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** office in Phuket Town is at 73–75 Phuket Rd. (✆ **07621-1036**), but it's also easy to find information through any hotel concierge or tour desk. You'll find lots of free maps on offer (all filled with advertisements). For driving around the island, pick up the very detailed *Periplus Editions Map of Phuket* at any bookstore. Restaurants and hotel lobbies are good places to pick up a number of free local publications: *Phuket Food-Shopping-Entertainment* is packed with dining suggestions and ads for many of the island's activities; *What's on South* has some useful information on Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, and Krabi; and there are a few fun ultraglossy local magazines for sale.

Fast Facts Phuket

Currency Exchange Banks are in Phuket Town, with many larger branches on Ranong and Rasada roads. There are bank offices at the airport, as well as branches

of major Thai banks at Kata, Karon, and Patong beaches. See each destination section for more information. Money changers are in major shopping areas on each beach and at most resorts, but banks offer the best rates.

Hospitals The **Bangkok Phuket Hospital** (2/1 Hongyok-Uthit Rd., off Yaowarat Rd. in Phuket Town; ✆ **07625-4425;** www.phukethospital.com) has English-speaking staff and high-quality facilities, and accepts international medical insurance.

Internet Access Internet service is fairly easy to find on the island. There are cafes aplenty in Patong; the best are farther away from the beach.

Mail The general post office in Phuket Town is at the corner of Thalang and Montri roads.

Police The emergency number for the **tourist police** is the fast-dial four-digit ✆ **1155.**

WHERE TO STAY

The island's accommodations and restaurants below are divided by beach area, to help you simplify your choices. Hotel listings provide high-season rack rates, an almost fictitious fee but a good point of departure for gauging price. Expect to pay from 30% to as much as 50% below the listed rates, especially in low season.

Phuket Town

Most just pass through the island's commercial hub, but there are some high-class facilities if you're stuck, plus a few restaurants worth the trip, especially if Phuket island is your only destination (see "Where to Dine," later in this section).

If you're looking for a budget spot, the **Thalang Guesthouse** (37 Talang Rd.; ✆ **07621-4225;** www.talangguesthouse.com) is an old standby at the town center with rooms starting at 350B ($10/£6.35). Rooms are basic, but this Sino-Portuguese shophouse has lots of character and makes a convenient base to explore the town. The **Old Town Guesthouse** (42 Krabi Rd.; ✆ **07625-8272**) is under the same management and has similar rates.

Expensive

Royal Phuket City Hotel ★ For a small town such as Phuket, this hotel is surprisingly cosmopolitan. A true city hotel, Royal Phuket's facilities include one of the finest fitness centers going, a full-service spa with massage, a large outdoor swimming pool, and a very professional business center. Above the cavernous marble lobby, guest rooms are smart—in contemporary hues and style, but dull with views of the busy little town below that pale in comparison to the beachfront just a short ride away. Pickles Restaurant serves international cuisine; the Chinatown Restaurant is one of the most posh in town. Few indeed stay in Phuket Town, but if you're stuck here, go for style.

154 Phang-Nga Rd., Amphur Muang, Phuket 83000 (to the east of Phuket Town, across from the intercity bus terminal). ✆ **07623-3333.** Fax 07623-3335. www.royalphuketcity.com. 251 units. 2,600B–2,900B ($74–$83/£47–£53) double; from 4,500B ($129/£82) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; golf course nearby; fitness center w/sauna, steam, massage, and spa; tour desk; limo service; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Nai Harn Beach

Very Expensive

The Royal Phuket Yacht Club ★★ Perched above the northern edge of Nai Harn Beach, overlooking the public beach and yachts beyond, the Yacht Club is one of the earliest luxury accommodations in Phuket, yet it still rivals nearly anything on the island for setting and comfort. Originally operated by Mandarin Oriental, then by Le Meridien, this award-winning property is now managed by Puravarna. As you enter, the pagoda-style foyer gives way to the terraced gardens overflowing with pink and white bougainvillea. Common areas are terra-cotta tile and open-air with views. All rooms have large balconies for viewing the beach, the Andaman Sea, and Promthep Cape from every angle. Interiors are spacious and decorated with cheerful fabrics and wicker furniture; bathrooms are huge, many with sunken tubs, and come with luxury amenities. The resort is more sedate and romantic than the many noisy family establishments on the island.

23/3 Viset Rd., Nai Harn Beach, Phuket 83130 (above Nai Harn Beach, 18km/11 miles south of Phuket Town). ✆ **07638-1156.** Fax 07638-1164. www.puravarna.com. 110 units. 11,100B ($317/£202) double; from 20,900B ($597/£380) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; patio lounge; outdoor pool; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; small fitness center; spa w/Jacuzzi, steam, massage, and face and body treatments; extensive watersports equipment; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; small boutique; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/pay movies, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Kata Beach

Arguably one of the nicest beaches on Phuket, Kata is a wide strip of soft sand and rolling surf. Rent an umbrella for 100B ($2.85/£1.80) per day, get a massage, or grab a kayak or surfboard and hit the waves (okay, the small waves, mostly). Unfortunately, the most choice real estate near the beach is taken up by the sprawling **Club Med Phuket** (✆ **07633-0456;** www.clubmed.com), a branch of the famous chain.

Expensive

Kata Beach Resort ★ With its soaring granite-and-marble lobby and fine rooms, the Kata is the best choice on Kata Beach proper and attracts not only individual tourists looking for comfort, but also a burgeoning international conference market. Go for a deluxe beach-view room in the central building—the slightly higher-priced choice, but the view really is lovely. All units have balconies and are attractively decorated. ***Hint:*** For the best views of the bay and Crab Island beyond, ask for a room on the third floor, not the fourth (palm fronds obstruct the view).

1 Pakbang Rd., Kata Beach, Phuket 83100 (on the Kata Beach strip). ✆ **07633-0530.** Fax 07633-0128. www.katagroup.com. 273 units. 10,000B ($286/£182) superior double; 11,076B ($316/£201) deluxe seaview double; from 17,183B ($491/£312) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna and massage; watersports equipment; children's center; concierge; tour desk; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Katathani Phuket Beach Resort ★ Kids Occupying a half-mile-long stretch of lovely Kata Noi Beach, the Kata Thani is a haven of understated luxury. Divided into two wings, each with its own lobby, rooms and suites are of a very high standard. The beachfront Thani wing is all suites, notable for their fine ocean views. The Bhuri wing, across the street, is where the more affordable superior rooms can be found. Attractive wood floors, marble bathrooms, and comfortable beds make these a decent value. Wide, well-groomed lawns surround sizable pools and lead to the graceful curve of the pristine cove.

If at any time you feel like you're walking on a putting green, you probably are—putters and balls are available at the ocean-side bar. Kata Noi is a bit out of the fray, just over the hill from the main Kata beach and far from the raucous strip at Patong, but the hotel is fully self-contained and can arrange transport for any excursion. ***Note:*** The Katathani is usually quite crowded and very popular with families. This is not the resort for a quiet, romantic getaway.

14 Kata Noi Rd., Kata Noi Beach, Phuket 83100 (north end of Kata Noi Beach). ✆ **07633-0124.** Fax 07633-0426. www.katathani.com. 479 units. $370 (£247) superior; from $425 (£283) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 2 lounges; 6 outdoor pools; golf course nearby; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; aromatherapy spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment/scuba diving; game room; tour desk; car rental; limo service; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Mom Tri's Boathouse and Villa Royale ★★ At the quieter south end of Kata Beach, the **Boathouse** is a longtime favorite with many return visitors. More inn than resort, there's a real home-style feeling here. Comfortable, attractive rooms all face the sea, each with a terrace overlooking a courtyard pool and beach beyond, but not particularly luxurious (though clean and adequate). Nothing about the hotel calls attention to itself; instead, it's the friendly, attentive staff that makes it special. The Boathouse restaurant is an old favorite for the visiting connoisseur (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter). It offers good cooking classes, too.

For a very special stay, stop in at Mom Tri's latest venture, **Villa Royale,** a collection of superluxe suites. An artist and architect, Mom Tri built these hillside villas perched over a steep cliff with stunning views of the sea. Each is sumptuously decorated in a unique mix of local materials: dark teaks, mosaics of bamboo and coconut, black tile with stone inlay, and elegant weavings. No two units are the same—the Toey Talay even has its own wine cellar. Walk through the grounds, and you'll discover museum-worthy pieces of art from Mom Tri's personal collection, including an antique hand-carved gate from Chiang Mai. Mom Tri's Kitchen, the hotel's companion restaurant, offers some of the best dining on the island (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter).

Kata Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07633-0015.** Fax 07633-0561. www.boathousephuket.com or www.villaroyalephuket.com. 38 units at the Boathouse; 27 units at Villa Royale. 10,500B ($300/£191) Boathouse double; from 18,500B ($529/£336) Boathouse suite; from 14,000B ($400/£255) Villa suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; outdoor pool; golf course nearby; fitness center; Jacuzzi; limo service; limited room service (7am–10:30pm); massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Kata Palm Resort & Spa ★ Value Kids For the price and facilities, you can't beat the Kata Palm. It's stuck behind the oceanfront Club Med, making it a bit of a hike to get to the beach, but the pool more than makes up for the lack of beach access. A wandering affair, the pool wraps around a central lounge area and is beautifully landscaped with palm trees, orchids, and frangipani flowers. Rooms are in three-story blocks, some with direct access to the pool from attached patios. Deluxe units in the newer block farthest from the lobby are your best bet. Four-poster daybeds, tasteful Thai decor, and bathrooms with separate shower and faux-antique tub make these a good upgrade. The Kata Palm is popular with families and offers one of the best values on Phuket.

60 Kata Rd., Kata Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07628-4334.** Fax 07628-4342. www.katapalmresort.com. 180 units. 6,500B ($186/£118) superior; 7,500B–8,500B ($214–$243/£136–£155) deluxe; 10,500B ($300/£191) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 pool bars; 2 outdoor pools; children's pool; fitness center;

 spa w/massage; kids' club; tour desk; shuttles to Patong; salon; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Katanoi Bay Inn Here's a no-muss-no-fuss pick for Phuket. This budget lodging provides you with a comfortable, very clean room without making you pay out the nose for resort facilities you might not even use. Rooms have balconies and good firm beds. There is little else in the way of facilities, but quiet Kata Noi Beach is just across the road (near the Katathani hotel).

69 Katanoi Rd., Kata Noi Beach, Phuket 83100 (Kata Noi is south of Kata Beach). ✆ **07633-3308.** Fax 07633-3545. www.katanoibayinn.com. 28 units. 1,200B–2,100B ($34–$60/£22–£38) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; car rental; laundry service; dry cleaning; Internet. *In room:* Fridge, satellite TV, IDD phone.

Karon Beach

Karon Beach is a long, straight stretch of beach lined with upper- and midrange hotels and resorts. You'll find heaps of tailors, gift shops, small restaurants, Internet service, and minimarts on the north end of the beach.

Expensive

Andaman Seaview Hotel ★★ Here's one that is highly recommended if you can book it (the word is out and it is often full). Bright and airy public spaces—done in Mediterranean hues of light blue and white, a Sino-Portuguese theme—are flanked by ponds and give way to a large central courtyard, garden, and meandering pool. Rooms overlook the pool area and are large and nicely appointed, better than most in this category. Deluxe units are massive, featuring marble bar areas and his-and-hers sinks. Bright primary colors dominate and everything sparkles. There is a charm throughout that is less about luxury than about the warm welcome, tidy appearance of the place, and friendly crowd. The restaurant is a de rigueur hotel coffee shop, but you'll want to dine at poolside: In fact, do everything at poolside. You're just across the street from Karon Beach here.

Karon Rd., Phuket 83100 (along the main strip at Karon Beach). ✆ **07639-8111.** Fax 07639-8177. www.andamanphuket.com. 161 units. 8,000B ($229/£145) superior double; 9,600B ($274/£175) deluxe double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; poolside bar; 2 outdoor pools; small fitness center; small spa; Jacuzzi; gift shop; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; tailor; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort & Spa ★★ This modern, full-facility resort is a massive presence on Karon Beach and matches up to Hilton's high standards. Accommodations are spread among three separate wings, with the 12-story Lotus wings providing the most panoramic views. Rooms are attractive but bland, with standard bathroom facilities, and most with full or partial sea views. The newest addition to this sprawling campus is the luxury spa, a miniature Thai village with 15 villas connected by raised teakwood walkways. There are numerous facilities here, but chances are you won't be the only one using them at any given time—you don't stay at a Hilton for the solitude. If the pools get too crowded, Karon Beach is just a short hop across the street.

333 Patak Rd., Karon Beach, Phuket 83100 (middle of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07639-6433.** Fax 07639-6136. www1.hilton.com. 658 units. 8,800B–10,400B ($251–$297/£160–£189) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lounge and karaoke; 3 large outdoor pools; golf course nearby; putting green; 3 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; 2 squash courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; spa; game room; tour desk; limo service; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, safe.

Moderate

Karon Beach Resort This is the only Karon Beach property with direct beach access (from all others, you'll have to walk across the road). Rooms are midsize, with dark-wood entries, clean tile floors, and some Thai touches, but are most noteworthy for their orientation to the sea: Balconies are stacked in receding, semicircular tiers, and all look out on the pool below (first-floor units with direct pool access) or to the beach and sea beyond. You'll find good watersports rentals nearby. This is a cozy beachside choice and an affordable option for young couples.

51 Karon Rd., Tambon Karon, Phuket 83100 (south end of Karon Beach, just as the road bends up to cross to Kata). ✆ **07633-0006.** Fax 07633-0529. www.katagroup.com. 81 units. 10,478B ($299/£191) double; from 18,019B ($515/£328) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 outdoor pools; tour desk; car rental; courtesy car and airport transfer; spa and massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Marina Phuket Resort ★ These simple cottages, tucked in the jungle above a scenic promontory between Kata and Karon beaches, are quite comfortable and the best choice of the many midrange places nearby. Rates vary according to the view, but all have a jungle bungalow charm, connected by hilly walkways and boardwalks past the lush hillside greenery (keep your eyes peeled for wildlife). Guest rooms are decorated in Thai style but are not particularly luxurious: Standard rooms have plain tile floors and basic built-in furniture; superior rooms are just a bit larger, with more flourishes such as fine Thai fabrics, higher ceilings, and good views. It is a hike down to the rocky shore and the swimming isn't great, but there is a good seaside restaurant. The in-house **Marina Divers** (✆ **07633-0272**) is a PADI dive center that conducts classes, rents equipment, and leads good multiday expeditions.

47 Karon Rd., Karon Beach, Phuket 83100 (on bluff at south end of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07633-0625.** Fax 07633-0516. www.marinaphuket.com. 104 units. $160–$300 (£107–£200) double; $600 (£400) villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; pool; dive center; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, no phone.

Inexpensive

Golden Sand Inn One of only a few acceptable budget accommodations on this part of the island (they're either getting converted into swanky digs or falling into disrepair as in Patong), the Golden Sand is clean, reasonably quiet, and well maintained. The location isn't bad, on the northernmost end of Karon and not far from all the town services and the beach. Rooms are large and like those in a beat-up roadside motel. It does have a nice coffee shop, though, and a small pool. Off-season rates are cheap-cheap.

Karon Beach, Phuket 83100 (across highway from north end of beach above traffic circle). ✆ **07639-6493.** Fax 07639-6117. 125 units. 1,900B–2,800B ($54–$80/£35–£51) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, IDD phone.

Relax Bay

Le Meridien Phuket Beach Resort ★ Kids Le Meridien Phuket is tucked away on secluded Relax Bay, with a lovely 549m (1,800-ft.) beach and 16 hectares (40 acres) of tropical greenery. This is one of the largest resorts on the island, and throughout the year it's packed with Asian and European vacationers. The advantages of a larger resort are its numerous facilities—two big pools, watersports, four tennis courts, a putting green and practice range, and a fine fitness center. The disadvantage is the crowds. The staff is helpful but harried, and can often be found "dug in" behind the front desk like soldiers in a trench readying for the onslaught of the many big groups here. The resort caters to families, though, and there are lots of activities and a good day-care center that kids love.

The large complex combines Western and traditional Thai architecture, and one of the advantages to its U-shaped layout is that it ensures that 80% of the rooms face the ocean. Each cheerful room has modern furnishings of rattan and teak, as well as a balcony with wooden deck chairs. No fewer than 10 restaurants give you all kinds of dining options.

29 Soi Karon Nui, P.O. Box 277, Relax Bay, Phuket 83000. ✆ **0800/225-5843** or 07637-0100. Fax 07634-0479. www.lemeridien.com. 470 units. 8,925B–13,825B ($255–$395/£162–£251) double; from 14,875B ($425/£270) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 10 restaurants; 4 pubs w/games and live shows; 2 large outdoor pools; golf driving range and on-site pro; miniature golf; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; squash courts; rock-climbing wall; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment and dive center; bike rental; excellent children's center; game room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Patong Beach

Patong's got it all, but it's all stacked in a heap and glowing with neon. The area pulses with shopping, dining, and nightlife activity late into the evening. In the downtown area, it's all touts catcalling and the beeping horns of passing tuk-tuks wanting to take you for a ride (quite literally); but Patong does have tons of services and some good accommodations (the best find creative ways to make you feel like you're not in Patong).

Expensive

Amari Coral Beach Resort & Spa ★★ The Coral Beach gets the nod for its wonderful location atop the rocks high above Patong, at the southern tip well away from the din of Patong's congested strip, but close enough for access to the mayhem. The beachfront below is rocky, but it's a good place to search for sea creatures at low tide. The whole resort, from the very grand terraced lobby to the guest rooms and fine pool, is situated toward incredible views of the huge bay below. The rooms have sea-foam tones, cozy balconies, and all the comforts of home. The hotel's Italian restaurant, La Gritta (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter), is special, and there's also live music nightly.

2 Meun-ngern Rd., Phuket 83150 (south of and uphill from Patong Beach). ✆ **07634-0106.** Fax 07634-0115. www.amari.com. 197 units. 6,379B–8,489B ($182–$243/£116–£154) double; from 12,654B ($362/£230) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; 2 outdoor pools; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa; dive center; game room; tour desk; car rental; limo service; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, safe.

Holiday Inn Resort Phuket ★★ Kids The older buildings at this Holiday Inn are modern, concrete blocks and not particularly luxurious, but the newer Busakorn Wing features more stylish rooms with Thai decor, teak appointments, carvings, and pottery. If on a honeymoon, go for a newer room; if with the kids, the old block will do the trick (and save some money). In fact, what distinguishes the Holiday Inn is its excellent offerings for families. The central pool areas have elaborate fountains and a fun meander suited to kids of all ages, and the hotel has active kids' programs, family activities and excursions, and a children's center, not to mention babysitting for when Mom and Dad need a night out. There are even family suites, with separate "kids' rooms" that have jungle or pirate theme decor, TVs with video and PlayStation, toys, and bunk beds. The hotel's minibar scheme is unique; rooms have just a bare fridge, and guests visit a small convenience store in the lobby to choose what they want; it's all delivered to your room at a cost of only a small bump-up from the retail price.

52 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach, Phuket 83150 (Patong Beach strip). ✆ **0800/HOLIDAY** (465-4329) or 07634-0608. Fax 07634-0435. www.phuket.holiday-inn.com. 405 units. 6,700B ($191/£122) superior double; 8,300B ($237/£151) Busakorn studio; 10,500B ($300/£191) family suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:**

4 restaurants; lounge; 2 outdoor pools; fitness center; spa w/massage, sauna, and steam; tiptop children's center and programs; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; self-service laundry; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Impiana Phuket Cabana Resort & Spa ★★ The Impiana is the only high-end property in Patong with direct beachfront access. It was heavily damaged by the 2004 tsunami, shutting its doors for almost a year, but it's now better than ever. Cabanas have been refitted with polished stone floors, vaulted ceilings, and recessed lighting. Each is fashioned in a pleasingly minimal contemporary boutique style. The beach is only steps away, a major selling point, but there is also a beachfront infinity-edge pool if the strip gets too crowded. The location means that you are right in the thick of things, but the rooms are far enough removed from the main drag for privacy.

41 Thaweewongse Rd., Patong Beach, Phuket 83150 (middle of Beach Rd.). ✆ **07634-0138.** Fax 07634-0178. www.impiana.com. 70 units. 10,500B–12,500B ($300–$357/£191–£227) double; 16,200B–18,700B ($463–$534/£295–£340) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; pool; spa; watersports equipment; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Novotel Coralia Phuket ★ Set high in the hills on the north end of Patong, the Novotel is a lovely hideaway. It's typical of Accor hotels anywhere: good service and comfortable rooms done in a local style. What sets this apart is the three-tiered pool at the center of the property and its dynamic view of the beach and sea from this towering point. The lobby is under an enormous steep Thai roof, and from its luxury massage pavilions to the many fine-dining choices, guests are constantly wrapped in comfort and reminded of Thai culture.

Kalim Beach Rd., Patong Beach, Phuket 83150 (on the hill north of town, just as the road heads uphill). ✆ **07634-2777.** Fax 07634-2168. www.novotelphuket.com or www.accorhotels.com. 215 units. 7,890B–9,890B ($225–$283/£143–£180) double; from 11,890B ($340/£216) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; pool w/multiple tiers; 2 tennis courts; fitness center; sauna; kids' club; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Budget accommodations are best along Kata and Karon beaches in the southern end of the island. In Patong, the budget hotels are generally run-down, even seedy, owing to the hostess-bar and go-go scene. A notable exception is the deluxe rooms at the **Baumanburi** (239/1 Rat-U-Thit Pi Rd.; ✆ **07634-5951**). While the standard units are depressing cells, the deluxe rooms are in a separate block overlooking the attractive pool and garden area—a steal at only 3,500B ($100/£64) a night. Another 1,300B ($37/£24) gets you direct access to the pool from your private patio. If you don't mind a couple of minutes' walk to the beach, **BB Cottage** (17/21 Soi Saen Sabai; ✆ **07634-2948**) has a range of basic but clean bungalows in a tranquil garden starting at 1,150B ($33/£21).

Northwest Coast: Pansea Beach (Surin Beach)

Also known as Surin Beach, the Pansea area has coconut plantations, steep slopes leading down to the beach, and small, private coves dominated by two of the most secluded and divine hotels on the island.

Very Expensive

Amanpuri ★★★ The discreet and sublime Amanpuri is the Phuket address for international celebrities. It's the most elegant and secluded resort in Thailand and quite

possibly all of Southeast Asia. The lobby is an open-air pavilion with a standing Buddha near a lovely swimming pool and stairs leading to the beach. Free-standing pavilion suites dot the dense coconut-palm grounds; each is masterfully designed in traditional Thai style, with teak-and-tile floors, sliding teak doors, exquisite built-ins, and well-chosen accents, including antiques. Private *salas* (covered patios) are perfect for romantic dining or secluded sunbathing.

Pansea Beach, Phuket 83110 (north end of cove). ✆ **07632-4333.** Fax 07632-4100. www.amanresorts.com. 70 units. $925 (£617) garden-view pavilion; $1,150–$1,750 (£767–£1,167) sea view pavilion; from $2,750 (£1,833) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 pools; golf course nearby; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; squash courts; fitness center; spa; sauna; watersports equipment and instruction; private yacht fleet; concierge; limo service; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, stereo, IDD phone.

The Chedi, Phuket ★★ Like its august neighbor Amanpuri (see above), the Chedi commands an excellent view of the bay below and has its own private stretch of sand. From the exotic lobby—with columns and a lily pond—to the sleek private bungalows, it is one of the most handsome properties on the island. It's quality with a big price tag, but this romantic getaway has it down to the details. Each room is a thatched minisuite with a lovely private deck and top amenities. The black-tile swimming pool is large and luxurious. The snappy staff can arrange any watersports, sightseeing tours, or activities. The fine service here caters to the likes of honeymooners and celebrities, and everyone is a VIP. While it may not be as outwardly impressive as its extraordinary neighbor, the Chedi is quiet, comfortably informal, and very relaxing. There's a top-notch cooking school as well.

118 Moo 3, Choeng Talay, Pansea Beach, Phuket 83110 (next to the Amanpuri). ✆ **07632-4017.** Fax 07632-4252. www.ghmhotels.com. 108 units. 16,200B–25,200B ($463–$720/£295–£458) 1-bedroom cottage; 21,100B–32,800B ($603–$937/£384–£596) 2-bedroom cottage; 29,700B–38,600B ($849–$1,103/£540–£702) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; volleyball and badminton; spa; watersports equipment; children's center; game room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Bang Tao Bay (Laguna Resort Complex)

Twenty minutes south of the airport and just as far north of Patong Beach on the western shore of Phuket, this isolated area is Phuket's "integrated resort" of five high-end properties that share some of the island's most top-rated facilities. Among them you'll find world-class spas, countless restaurants, and the island's best golf course. The grounds are impressively landscaped, and the hotel properties are scattered among the winding lagoons, all navigable by boat. The best thing about staying here is that you can dine at any of the fine hotel restaurants, connecting by boat or free shuttle, and be charged on one simple bill at whatever resort you're staying at.

Very Expensive

Banyan Tree Phuket ★★★ Banyan Tree is a famous hideaway for honeymooners and high society (paparazzi-free for your protection). There is nothing like it for people of means who need an escape. Private villas with walled courtyards (many with private pool or Jacuzzi) are spacious and grand, lushly styled in teakwood. The style throughout is low Thai pavilions, with good Thai touches such as platform beds and murals depicting the *Ramakien,* an ancient Thai saga. The resort can arrange private barbecues at your villa, as well as private massages in your room or in outdoor pavilions. The reception area is a large open *sala* with lovely lotus pools. A small village in itself, the spa provides a wide range of beauty and health treatments in luxurious rooms. The Tamarind Restaurant serves

delicious, light, and authentic spa cuisine. The main pool is truly impressive—a free-form lagoon, landscaped with greenery and rock formations—with a flowing water canal. There's a top-notch golf course on-site, a private tour office, and the beach just a short walk away. Understandably, many guests never leave their villa, much less the resort.

33 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherngtalay District, Amphur Talang, Phuket 83110 (north end of beach). ✆ **800/591-0439** in the U.S. or 07632-4374. Fax 07632-4375. www.banyantree.com. 149 units. $1,324 (£883) villa; $1,735 (£1,157) pool villa; $2,647 (£1,765) spa pool villa; from $3,971 (£2,647) 2-bedroom villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lounge; outdoor lagoon-style pool; golf course; 3 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; award-winning spa w/spa pool, sauna, steam, and massage; watersports equipment; tour desk; car rental; limo service; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/pay movies, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Dusit Laguna Resort, Phuket ★ (Kids) The Dusit hotel group has some fine properties in Thailand, and the Dusit Laguna is no exception. Older rooms are midsize and done with pastel tiles, faux columns, and bathrooms that open to the living area via wide, wooden doors. There are lots of Thai touches throughout—some tacky, others (like some of the large, traditional hangings) quite pleasing. New club rooms are part of the Dusit's effort to shed its traditional image and appeal to a younger, hipper crowd. Sleek and modern, decked out in royal blue and gold, these units all have ocean views and are a complete departure in style from the other rooms. Of the hotel's fine-dining options, particularly of note is the quaint Italian restaurant, La Trattoria, serving authentic Italian in a chic but laid-back garden-side pavilion decorated in cool white and blue. The well-landscaped gardens at seaside have an especially delightful waterfall and an excellent pool, and the grounds open onto a long, wide, white-sand beach flanked by two lagoons. Facilities for kids are great: a kids' corner, babysitting, playground, and computer games.

390 Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherngtalay District, Phuket 83110 (south end of beach). ✆ **07636-2999.** Fax 07636-2900. http://phuket.dusit.com. 226 units. 11,000B–14,000B ($314–$400/£200–£255) double; 22,000B ($629/£400) club double; from 29,000B ($829/£527) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; free-form outdoor pool; golf course nearby; pitch and putt on premises; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; watersports equipment; bike rental; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket ★★ The granddaddy of the lagoon in terms of size, the Sheraton is a sprawling luxury campus of two- and three-story hotel-style pavilions. Rooms are quite large, with tile floors, cozy sitting areas, balconies, and newly refurbished bathrooms. Those looking for more privacy should consider the Grande Villas: These one- to four-bedroom suites provide nice perks including exclusive access to facilities such as the villa pool (no kids allowed). The main pool is a long, winding meander. There are good amenities for kids of all ages, from a children's club to beach games and sailboat rental at the private, sandy put-in at the lagoon. And don't miss the Sheraton's two pet elephants, Ning Nong and Yum Yum, who can assist you in all of your pachyderm-related needs. With both fine dining and more casual eateries and cafes (including a good bakery), plus a very professional staff, the Sheraton is a fine, reliable, familiar choice.

10 Moo 4, Srisoothorn Rd., Phuket 83110. ✆ **07632-4101.** Fax 07632-4108. www.sheratonphuket.com. 297 units. $450–$620 (£300–£413) double; from $995 (£663) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar and lounge; 2 outdoor pools; golf course nearby; 2 outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment; bike rental; kids' club; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Nai Yang Beach

Hat Nai Yang National Park is a long stretch of shoreline peeking out from underneath a dense forest of palms, casuarina, and other indigenous flora. It's become an area known for the yearly release of baby turtles into the wild. This area is good if you want to leave the crowds behind, but be warned that it is isolated and quite rustic. For accommodations, there are two top-line options. The secluded **Adamas Resort & Spa** (✆ **07631-6000;** www.adamasresortspa.com), with luxury rooms from 12,000B ($343/£218). The **Indigo Pearl** (✆ **07632-7006;** www.indigo-pearl.com) also has a range of luxurious rooms, villas, and pool pavilions with rates starting at 15,000B ($429/£273).

Mai Khao Beach

Mai Khao is a marvelous beach on the northwestern shore near the airport. It's where sea turtles lay their eggs during December and January; efforts are ongoing to protect the breeding grounds, since turtle eggs are a local delicacy.

Very Expensive

JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa ★★★ Relaxation. If ever a resort fully embodied this ethos, it is the Marriott. From the moment you set foot in this beachside paradise, you are encouraged to let the troubles of the outside world slip away. The resort is set on a desolate and windswept stretch of Mai Khao Beach, and the sounds of birds and flowing water follow you wherever you step. Comfortable spots to curl up and read are around every corner, from daybeds on stairwell landings to reading nooks in each beautifully appointed room. Arrivals at night will be awed by the opulence of oversize torches lining the circular drive; the wide, low pavilions of the lobby surround an enormous black reflecting pool that sparkles with torchlight. There are no services outside of the hotel, and it is a 30-minute drive to the nearest tourist area—there are regular shuttles—but the resort facilities are so complete that guests needn't leave. Rooms are private getaways with open-plan bathrooms and the aforementioned reading corner, with Thai cushions and lovely balconies that give way to sumptuous gardens: a hidden Eden. Enjoy the very professional service, fine spa treatments, sports, activities, and dining. The hotel can arrange transport anywhere on the island, and there are a host of excursions to choose from at the helpful tour desk.

231 Moo 3, Mai Khao, Talang, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07633-8000.** Fax 07634-8348. www.marriott.com. 265 units. 9,500B–12,100B ($271–$346/£173–£220) deluxe double; from 19,500B ($557/£355) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 3 bars; 3 outdoor pools; 2 tennis courts; top-notch fitness center w/lots of activities; extensive spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment (Hobie Cat and runabouts); complimentary bikes; children's center and kids' club; teen activity center w/computers; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; convenience store; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

From tip to tip, north to south, it's more than a 1-hour drive on Phuket, but hired tuk-tuks, hotel transport, or even self-drive vehicles mean that for dining and nightlife, you can choose from any establishments on the island. The beach areas in the west are chockablock with small, storefront eateries, while Patong features everything from the obligatory McDonald's and Starbucks to designer sushi chains.

Phuket Town

Though it's a long ride from the west-coast beach areas, a night out in Phuket Town is worth it for some fine meals and a taste of local culture.

Salvatore ★ ITALIAN "Va bene!" It's the real thing here: pasta, grilled dishes, huge salads, pizza, and a great wine list in a large, air-conditioned dining room at the town center. Salvatore himself comes to your table and will make you something special. There are lots of Italian restaurants in all of the resort areas of Thailand, but this is one of the best, with an unpretentious atmosphere and good food that draw many regular customers. Fine pasta, lasagna, steaks, cacciatore dishes, and a range of daily specials are all made with fresh ingredients. All the extras—such as the important spices, garnishes, even prosciutto, and, of course, the wine—are imported. Don't miss the dessert of Limoncello Truffle, a liqueur meringue that goes great with the strong coffee.

15 Rasada Rd., Tambol Taladyai, in central Phuket Town. ✆ **07622-5958.** Reservations not necessary. Main courses 250B–800B ($7.15–$23/£4.50–£14). AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat noon–2:30pm and 6:30–11pm; Sun 6:30–11pm. Closed Mon.

Kata & Karon Beaches

The busy road between Kata and Karon (as well as the many side streets) is packed with small cafes and restaurants serving affordable Thai and Western food. Stop by **Euro Deli** (58/60 Karon Rd.; ✆ **07628-6265**) for a good sandwich; it's open from 10am to 11pm.

Expensive

The Boathouse ★★★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL So legendary is the Thai and Western cuisine at the Boathouse, the inn where it resides (see **Mom Tri's Boathouse and Villa Royale** in "Where to Stay," earlier in this section) offers popular vacation packages for visitors who wish to come and take lessons from its chef. A large bar and separate dining area sport nautical touches, and through huge picture windows diners can watch the sun set over the watery horizon. The cuisine combines the best of East and West and utilizes only the finest ingredients. If you're in the mood for the works, the Phuket lobster is one of the most expensive dishes on the menu, but is worth every baht. The Boathouse also has an excellent selection of international wines—more than 500 labels. And if that doesn't tickle your taste buds, **Mom Tri's Kitchen,** another upscale venture from the folks at the Boathouse, is just up the hill and serves similar fine cuisine from its luxury perch. *Bon appétit.*

At the Boathouse Inn, Kata Beach. ✆ **07633-0015.** www.boathousephuket.com. Reservations recommended during peak season. Main courses 380B–1,950B ($11–$56/£7–£35); seafood at market prices. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–11pm. No children after 8pm.

Moderate

Mom Tri's Gung ★ THAI/JAPANESE A less formal affair than Mom Tri's other culinary offerings (see above), Gung serves fine Thai and Japanese fare. The menu is short, but what is offered is of the highest quality. For starters, try the tapas plate, a nice selection of grilled and fried seafood, followed by the grilled teriyaki sea bass—very light and with just the right amount of sauce. With outdoor terrace seating right on the beach, Gung is the perfect place to kick back and enjoy beach life.

Kata Beach (next to the Boathouse). ✆ **07633-0015.** Reservations recommended for dinner during peak season. Main courses 200B–520B ($5.70–$15/£3.60–£9.45). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–11pm.

On the Rock Part of the Marina Phuket Resort (see "Where to Stay," earlier in this section), this unassuming little restaurant serves excellent Thai meals from a scenic deck high above the south end of Karon Beach. Newly renovated but still laid-back and charmingly rustic, it offers some of the best views of the beach below. Try the seafood basket, a medley of grilled and fried ocean critters. There are steaks and French entrees

such as chicken *cordon bleu,* but stick with the better Thai dishes for a great meal in a great atmosphere.

47 Karon Rd., Karon Beach (on bluff at south end of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07633-0625.** Fax 07633-0516. www.marinaphuket.com. Main courses 250B–800B ($7.15–$23/£4.55–£15). AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

Patong Beach

Some of the best seafood dining in busy Patong doesn't come from any upscale restaurant, but from the small **food stalls** at the north end of Patong along busy Rat-U-Thit Road. It's really just a collection of outdoor restaurants sharing a large open-air dining area. Visitors who approach or show any interest will be attacked with menus and implored to choose from among the restaurants. It can be a bit off-putting, but just pick a menu or a kind face (the others will disperse) and order from a wide selection of fresh seafood, prepared as you like it. It's good food at a fraction of restaurant prices.

Baan Rim Pa ★ THAI In a beautiful Thai-style teak house, Baan Rim Pa offers dining in a romantic indoor setting or from outdoor terraces with gorgeous views of the bay. Among high-end travelers, the restaurant has long been one of the most popular stops on the island, so be sure to reserve your table early. The Thai cuisine features seafood, plus a variety of other meat and vegetable dishes, including a rich duck curry and a sweet honey chicken dish. The seafood basket is a fantastic assortment of prawns, mussels, squid, and crab. The owner also runs two other restaurants on the cliff side next to Baan Rim Pa: **Da Maurizio** (✆ **07634-4079**) and **Joe's Downstairs** (✆ **07634-4254**).

223 Kalim Beach Rd., on the cliffs just north of Patong Beach. ✆ **07634-0789.** www.baanrimpa.com. Reservations necessary. Main courses 350B–1,300B ($10–$37/£6.35–£24). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–10:30pm.

La Gritta ★ ITALIAN Similar to the Amari chain's other fine Italian restaurants of the same name, this one is notable for its views of Patong Beach below—the best in town, really. It's classic northern Italian cuisine: antipasti, salads, soups, grilled entrees, and pastas accompanied by an extensive wine list. The cooks use all fresh ingredients and serve a colorful antipasti plate that makes a great shared appetizer. ***Note:*** For a romantic evening, La Gritta is best visited after 8pm, unless your idea of romantic is listening to the lobby band rip through Ricky Martin's oeuvre.

At the Amari Coral Beach Resort, 2 Meun-ngern Rd., south of and uphill from Patong Beach. ✆ **07634-0106.** Main courses 350B–820B ($10–$23/£6.35–£15). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight.

Patong Seafood Restaurant SEAFOOD Take an evening stroll along the lively Patong Beach strip, and you'll find quite a few open-air seafood restaurants displaying their catch of the day on chipped-ice buffet tables out front. The best of them all is the casual Patong Seafood, for the freshest selection of seafood that includes several types of local fish, lobster, squid (very tender), prawn, and crab. The menu has a fantastic assortment of preparation styles, with photos of popular Thai noodles and Chinese stir-fry dishes. Service is good, and it's popular enough that it doesn't employ a carnival barker like most along the strip; it attracts with the food rather than promoting with ploys.

Patong Beach Rd., Patong Beach. ✆ **07634-0247.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 80B–280B ($2.30–$8/£1.45–£5.10); seafood at market prices. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Sala Bua ★ THAI The lunch menu here features light Thai dishes, plus Western sandwiches and burgers. More pricey evening fare includes southern Thai-style seafood favorites—local Phuket lobster, huge juicy tiger prawns, and fresh fish steaks in a variety

of local preparations—expensive, but a good value. The imported New Zealand tenderloin is award-winning. For dessert, try the sticky-rice sushi rolls with sweet coconut milk and mango. Sala Bua is a far more intimate option than the crowded seafood joints across the street.

At the Impiana Phuket Cabana Resort, 94 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach (at the north end of the beach). ✆ **07634-2100.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 485B–2,250B ($14–$64/£8.80–£41). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6:30–10:30pm.

Bang Tao Bay (Laguna Resort Complex)

The many hotel restaurants of the five-star properties in the Laguna Resort Complex could fill a small guidebook on their own. You can't go too wrong in any of the hotels, really, and here, more than anywhere, it's a question of getting what you pay for; from superluxurious fine dining to laid-back grills or snack corners, everything's covered. One restaurant just outside the complex is worth mentioning, however—it's where all the hotel managers eat when they get out of work.

Tatonka ★★ INTERNATIONAL The food at Tatonka is billed as "globe-trotter cuisine," and dining here is indeed a foray into the realm of a culinary nomad. Harold Schwarz, the young owner and well-traveled chef, puts to use his many years in hotel restaurants around the world (his résumé is written on the bathroom wall, each tile featuring another of Harold's many stops). "Fusion" is a battered and broken term in restaurant parlance, but dishes here are a creative melding of Mediterranean, Pan-American, and Asian influence. The emphasis is on variety: Selections from the tapas menu include vegetable quesadillas, California crab cakes, stuffed calamari cups, wonton wafers, and rolls. The menu is updated frequently and depends on what is fresh that day, but may feature anything from Peking duck to pizza, gazpacho to Thai *tom yum* (hot-and-sour soup with shrimp). Ask what's good and enjoy.

382/19 Moo 1, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherngtalay (at the entrance of the Laguna Resort Complex in Bangtao Bay). ✆ **07632-4349.** Main courses 275B–560B ($7.85–$16/£5–£10). MC, V. Daily 6–10:30pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

There's lots to do on Phuket. Beach and outdoor activities top the list, and you'll find the beachfront areas full of tour operators, each vying for your business and offering similar trips (or copycat tours). Opportunities abound to visit the island's rustic bays, explore the many beaches, and take day trips to the jungle interior or to scenic Phang Nga Bay to the north.

If Phuket is your only destination in Thailand, you'll certainly want to get to some of the small rural temples and to **Phuket Town,** but the island's sights pale in comparison to culturally rich areas such as Bangkok or Chiang Mai. Still, there are a few Buddhist temples that are quite notable. The most famous one among Thai visitors is **Wat Chalong,** on the Bypass Road, about 8km (5 miles) south of Phuket Town. Chalong was the first resort on Phuket, back when the Thais first started coming to the island for vacations. Nowadays, the discovery of better beaches on the west coast has driven most tourists away from this area, but the temple still remains a center of Buddhist worship. While the temple compound itself is pretty standard in terms of modern temples, the place comes to life during Buddhist holy days. Also worth visiting is **Wat Pra Tong,** along Hwy. 402 in Thalang, just south of the airport—it's the most unique temple on the island.

Sea gypsies, the indigenous people of the southern islands, are fast disappearing from Phuket as commercial-fishing interests and shoreline development continue to threaten their livelihood of subsistence fishing. Gypsy villages are simple, floating shacks and

longtail boats. Visits to some of the larger settlements in Phang Nga Bay are included in many island day trips.

For a view of gorgeous **Phang Nga Bay,** book a trip aboard the ***June Bahtra,*** a restored Chinese sailing junk, to cruise the islands. Full-day trips include lunch and hotel transfers. Adults pay 3,700B ($106/£67), not including alcoholic beverages, and children 12 and under pay 1,850B ($53/£34). Contact **East West Siam,** 128/3 Chalermprakiat Rd., Patong (✆ **07637-6192;** www.asian-oasis.com), to book. For a different perspective of Phang Nga Bay, see "Sea Kayaking" under "Outdoor Activities," below.

Hat Nai Yang National Park, 90 sq. km (35 sq. miles) of protected land in the northwest corner of the island, offers a peaceful retreat from the rest of Phuket's tourism madness. There are two fantastic reasons to make the journey out to the park. The first is for Phuket's largest coral reef in shallow water, only 460m (1,400 ft.) from the shore. The second is for the giant leatherback turtles that come to nest every year between November and February. Park headquarters is a very short hop from Phuket Airport off Hwy. 402.

The **Gibbon Rehabilitation Project** ★★ (✆ **07626-0492;** www.gibbonproject.org), off Hwy. 4027 at the Bang Pae waterfall in the northeastern corner of the island, cares for mistreated gibbons, placing them in more caring and natural surroundings (among other gibbons). Volunteer guides offer tours. Open daily from 9am to 4:30pm; admission 200B ($5.70/£3.60) to enter Khao Phra Thaeo National Park, and donations for the project are appreciated.

At **Butterfly Garden & Insect World** (71/6 Moo 5, Yaowarat Rd.; ✆ **07621-0861;** www.phuketbutterfly.com), you get a crash course in the history and life cycles of insects followed by a walk through an enclosed garden housing thousands of butterflies bred on the premises. Don't forget your camera. Open daily from 9am to 5pm. Admission is 300B ($8.55/£5.45) for adults and 150B ($4.30/£2.70) for children 4 to 10.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Most of the noisier watersports activities are concentrated along Patong Beach—so swimmers can enjoy most of the other beaches without the buzz of a jet ski or power boat. **Jet skis** are technically illegal, but can still be rented for 30 minutes at about 800B ($23/£15). A 10-minute **parasailing** ride is around 1,000B ($28/£18), and you can rent outboard runabouts by the hour or the day. **Hobie Cats** go for 700B ($20/£13) per hour; **windsurfing** boards for 250B ($7.15/£4.55) per hour. There are no specific offices to organize these activities, just small operators with hand-painted signs at the beaches, and prices are negotiable.

BUNGEE JUMPING The **Jungle Bungy Jump** awaits! If you have the nerve to jump out 50m (164 ft.) over the water, call the "bungee hot line" at ✆ **07632-1351.** It's in Kathu, near Patong. The charge is 2,000B ($57/£36) per jump. It has a 100% safety record—knock wood.

GOLF There are some fine courses on Phuket; golf junkets bring vacationing expats and international tourists alike.

- **Banyan Tree Club & Laguna,** 34 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Road, at the Laguna Resort Complex on Bang Tao Bay (✆ **07627-0991;** fax 07627-0992; www.banyantree.com), is the best option, a par-71 resort course (greens fees: 3,500B/$100/£64, plus caddie fee; guests of the Laguna Resort Complex receive a discount).
- **Blue Canyon Country Club,** 165 Moo 1, Thepkasattri Road, near the airport (✆ **07632-8088;** fax 07632-8068; www.bluecanyonclub.com), has two world-class tracks, the Lakes and Canyon courses—the latter host to the Johnnie Walker Classic

in 1994 and 1998, won by Tiger Woods (greens fees: 4,000B/$114/£73 Lakes course, 5,600B/$160/£102 Canyon course).

- **Phuket Country Club,** 80/1 Vichitsongkram Rd., west of Phuket Town (✆ **07632-1038;** fax 07632-1721; www.phuketcountryclub.com), an older course that dates from 1989, has beautiful greens and fairways, plus a giant lake (greens fees: 3,200B/$91/£58).

HORSEBACK RIDING A romantic and charming way to see Phuket's jungles and beaches is on horseback. **Phuket Riding Club,** 95 Viset Rd., Chaweng Bay (✆ **07628-8213;** www.phuketridingclub.com), and **Phuket Laguna Riding Club,** 394 Moo 1, Bangthao Beach (✆ **07632-4199**), welcome riders of all ages and experience levels and can provide instruction for beginners and children. Prices start at 660B ($19/£12) per hour.

SCUBA DIVING With access to the nearby **Similan Islands,** Phuket is a popular scuba destination and one of the most affordable (and safe) places to get certified. There are three decompression chambers on the island and a strong dive community. The problem is, there are around 40 companies, and all can arrange day trips to the nearby coral wall and wrecks as well as overnight or long-term excursions to the Similan Islands (as well as PADI courses, Divemaster courses, 1-day introductory lessons, and open-water certification). Open-water courses can cost as little as 10,000B ($285/£182).

Many storefront operations are just consolidators for other companies, so ask if they have their own boats and whether they're PADI certified. Also check on the ratio of divers to instructor or Divemaster; anything more than five to one is not acceptable and should be more like two to one for beginner courses. Below are a few choices:

- **Scuba Cat** (94 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach; ✆ **07629-3120;** www.scubacat.com) has got the best thing going on Phuket. With more than 10 years of experience, a large expat staff, and its own fleet of boats, it's a very professional outfit offering the full range of day trips and luxury live-aboards for anyone from beginner to expert (and at competitive prices). You can't miss the small practice pool in front of its beachside Patong office (in fact, you have to cross a small bridge to get in the place). The staff is very helpful and welcoming.
- **Dive Asia** (main office: 24 Karon Rd., Kata Beach; ✆ **07633-0598;** fax 07628-4033; www.diveasia.com) is another reputable firm on Phuket. The dive packages include live-aboard trips to the Similan Islands and 4-day PADI certification courses, in addition to full-day dives around Phuket.
- **Sea Bees Diving** (1/3 Moo 9, Viset Rd., Chalong Bay; ✆ **07638-1765;** fax 07628-0467; www.sea-bees.com) is also a good outfit offering day trips from $100 (£67).

SEA KAYAKING **Phang Nga Bay National Park** ★★, a 1 1/2-hour drive north of Phuket (3 hr. by boat), hosts great day trips by sea kayak. The scenery is stunning, with limestone karst towers jutting precariously from the water's surface, creating more than 120 small islands. These craggy rock formations (the backdrop for the James Bond classic *The Man with the Golden Gun*) look straight out of a Chinese scroll painting. Sea kayaks are perfect for inching your way into the many breathtaking caves and chambers that hide beneath the jagged cliffs. All tours include the hour-plus rides to and from Phang Nga, the cruise to the island area, paddle guide, kayak, and lunch. The company that pioneered the cave trips is **Sea Canoe** (125/461 Baan Tung Ka–Baan Sapam Rd.; ✆ **07652-8839;** fax 07652-8841; www.seacanoe.net). It's much imitated, but still the best choice for day trips through island caves to central lagoons (called *hongs*). The standard day trip runs 3,200B ($91/£58) per person. It's touristy, you'll be sitting two to a

kayak, and you'll be paddled by a guide going in and out of the caves, unless you sign up for the self-paddle trip, which is a bit cheaper. The scenery is great and the caves are stunning. It also offers multiday and more adventurous "self-guided" tours.

The folks at **Paddle Asia** (9/71 Thanon Rasdanusorn; ✆/fax **07621-6145;** www.paddleasia.com) make Phuket their home and do trips throughout the region, with a focus more on custom adventure travel, not day junkets. It has great options for anyone from beginner to expert. On any trip, you'll get to paddle real decked kayaks, not inflatables. A highlight is its trip to Khao Sok National Park (p. 129), a 3-day adventure in which you'll see lots of monkeys and birds. In Phuket, it can arrange either offshore paddling to outlying islands or custom adventures.

ELEPHANT TREKKING Fun trips into Phuket's interior include **elephant trekking,** a perennial favorite for children, and a great time for adults, too. Elephants are not indigenous to Phuket, so what you get here is more or less a pony ride, but arguments over captive elephant-tour programs aside, the kids dig it (and the elephants do better here than when paraded around city streets for owners to collect coins). **Siam Safari Nature Tours** (45 Chaofa Rd., Chalong; ✆ **07628-0116;** www.siamsafari.com) coordinates daily treks on elephants, Land Rovers, river rafts, and traditional wooden junks. The four-in-one half-day ecoadventure is a 6-hour trip that includes elephant trekking through jungles to rubber estates, jeep touring to see local wildlife, watching trained monkeys pick coconuts, and a relaxing cruise on a wooden junk to Chalong Bay. A full-day tour includes canoeing and elephant trekking in Khao Sok National Park, with a Thai lunch.

YACHTING The crystal-blue waters of the Andaman Sea near Phuket are an old salt's dream. Every December, Phuket hosts the increasingly popular **King's Cup Regatta,** in which nearly 100 international racing yachts compete. For more information, check out www.kingscup.com.

There are lots of options for chartering yachts in Phuket. For details, contact **Asia Marine** (c/o Phuket Boat Lagoon, 20/7–8 Thepkasatri Rd., Tambon Ko Kaew, Phuket 83200; ✆ **07623-9111;** www.asia-marine.com).

THE SPA SCENE ★★★

If you've come to Phuket to escape and relax, there's no better way to accomplish your goal than to visit one of the island's spas. Even the smallest resort now offers full spa services (of varying quality), and you can find good, affordable massage along any beach and in storefronts in the main tourist areas.

For luxury treatments, one of the most famous and exclusive facilities here is the **Spa at the Banyan Tree Phuket** (p. 162; ✆ **07632-4374** for reservations; www.lagunaphuket.com/spa). In secluded garden pavilions, you'll be treated regally and can choose from many types of massage, body and facial treatments, or health and beauty programs. Expect to pay for the luxury—figure at least 2,000B ($57/£36) per individual treatment.

In Phuket Town, the **Cheraim Spa Village** (16 Wichitsongkram Rd.; ✆ **07624-9670;** www.cheraimspavillage.com) offers a wide variety of treatments ranging from massage to seaweed wraps, all in a relaxing garden setting. Highly recommended.

Another affordable place is the **Body & Mind Day Spa** (558/7–12 Patak Rd., Karon Beach; ✆ **07639-8274;** www.body-mindspa.com), where a soothing 1-hour foot massage costs 600B ($17/£11).

Moments The Best Sunset

On a good day, from the cliffs atop Promthep Cape on the southern tip of the island, the view of the sky as it changes colors at sunset—from gold to scarlet and purple—can compete with the best fireworks. The place isn't exactly a secret, so get here half an hour before sundown for a good viewing spot.

SHOPPING

Patong Beach is the center of handicrafts and souvenir shopping on Phuket; the main streets and small *sois* are chockablock with storefront tailors, leather shops, jewelers, and ready-to-wear clothing boutiques. Vendors line the side walks, selling everything from batik clothing, T-shirts, and pirated CDs to local arts, northern-hill-tribe handicrafts, silver, and souvenir trinkets. ***Be warned:*** Everywhere in Patong, they have the nasty habit of hassling passersby. Prices are a bit inflated, but a bit of haggling gets you the same cool goods that you'd otherwise find only in the far north or in Bangkok.

PHUKET AFTER DARK

From the huge billboards and glossy brochures, **Phuket FantaSea** ★★ (✆ **07638-5111** for reservations; www.phuket-fantasea.com), the island's premier theme attraction, could be touristy and ridiculous—it is. But it's fun in the same way Atlantic City can be fun. This big theme park has a festival village lined with glitzy shops, games, entertainment, and snacks. A wander here will keep you busy until the show starts. There's a huge buffet in the palatial Golden Kinaree Restaurant; afterward, visitors proceed to the Palace of the Elephants for the show. The in-your-face advertising for the place alone is enough to put you off (witness the trucks driving around town with loudspeakers and posters plastered on anything flat), but it's worth a trip. Many places include transport in the price of the ticket. The show is at Kamala Beach, north of Patong, on the coastal road. The stage is dark on Thursdays. The park opens at 5:30pm, the buffet begins at 6:30pm, and the show is at 9pm. Tickets for the show are 1,500B ($43/£27), while dinner and transfer fees usually add 400B ($11/£7.25) for adults and 200B ($5.70/£3.60) for children. Ask about the rates at any hotel concierge, as they often have deals.

Dino Park Mini Golf (✆ **07633-0625;** www.dinopark.com) is for kids young and old. There's golf for the kids, and a restaurant and bar for mom and dad. It's located on the south of Karon Beach, next to the Marina Phuket Resort.

Phuket's resident cabaret troupe can be found at **Simon Cabaret,** 8 Sirirach Rd., Patong Beach (✆ **07634-2011**). There are shows at 7:30 and 9:30pm nightly for 800B ($23/£14) adults, 600B ($17/£11) kids; it's on the south end of Patong. It's a featured spot on every planned tour agenda, so it draws busloads. The glitzy transsexual show caters mostly to Asian tourists—the lip-sync numbers of popular Asian pop songs keep the audience roaring. It can be a lot of fun. In between the comedy are dance numbers with pretty impressive sets and costumes; performers are available for photos after the show.

You can catch Thai boxing at **Vegas Thai Boxing** (at Patong Simon Shopping Arcade, Soi Bangla, Patong). Bouts start every night at 7pm and last until 3am. Fight-night info is all over town, and admission is free.

Patong nightlife is wild. Lit up like a little LasVegas, the beach town hops every night of the week. Shops and restaurants stay open late, and tourists choose from an array of bars, nightclubs, karaoke lounges, snooker halls, massage parlors, go-go bars, and dance shows a la Bangkok's Patpong or the streets of Pattaya. Bangla Road, perpendicular to the beach road on the north end of Patong, is the little red-light district in town, where the hostess girls line up and reel in passersby (it goes something like: "Hey, handsome man, where you go?"). It's pretty seedy, but it's a funny scene. A few bars about halfway down the road are always packed for views of the informal tabletop dancing. The curvaceous, costumed dancers are mostly transsexuals (***Important:*** No photos).

Molly Malone's (✆ **07629-2771**) and **Scruffy Murphy's** (✆ **07629-2590**), both along the main strip in Patong, are the obligatory beachside Irish pubs. Good atmosphere, good service, good pints. Both are fine places to start the night, end the night, or spend the whole night (they'll wake you up at closing time). There are also a few discos in town; just ask around to find out what's going on.

18 KRABI

814km (505 miles) S of Bangkok, 211km (131 miles) SW of Surat Thani, 165km (102 miles) E of Phuket, 42km (26 miles) E of Ko Phi Phi

Krabi is a popular alternative to busy Phuket. Ferries and minivans connect the town of Krabi (few stay here) to the nearby beach and tourist strip at **Ao Nang** and to the farther-flung beaches: **Railay Beach** ★★, the famed "climbers' beach" with its stunning karst towers, is accessed by boat, while **Khlong Muang Beach,** only recently developed, is north of Ao Nang.

GETTING THERE

There are boat and bus connections between Krabi and Phuket, as well as connections via Surat Thani with the east-coast islands of Ko Samui and Ko Pha Ngan.

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111**) flies at least twice daily from Bangkok, as does **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02265-5678**). Budget carrier **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999**) also has daily connections. From the airport, you can catch a shuttle bus to town for 90B ($2.55/£1.60). Taxis start at 350B ($10/£6.35).

BY BUS Two air-conditioned VIP (top-line buses with plenty of legroom and reclining seats) 24-seater buses leave daily from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02435-1195;** trip time: 12 hr.; 850B/$24/£15) to Krabi Town. Frequently scheduled air-conditioned minibuses leave daily from Surat Thani to Krabi (trip time: 2 3/4 hr.; 250B/$7.15/£4.55). Three air-conditioned minibuses leave daily from Phuket Town to Krabi (trip time: 3 1/2 hr.; 350B/$10/£6.35).

BY BOAT Twice-daily trips leave from Ko Phi Phi to Krabi (trip time: 1 1/2 hr.; 390B/$11/£7). There are two daily boats from Ko Lanta to Krabi in high season (trip time: 2 1/2 hr.; 390B/$11/£7).

GETTING AROUND

Krabi Town is the commercial hub in the area, but few stay here. There is frequent ***songtao*** service between Krabi Town and Ao Nang Beach; just flag down a white pickup (trip time: 30 min.; 30B/85¢/55p). **Railay Beach** is not an island, but is cut off by its high cliffs from the mainland and reachable only by boat from the pier in Krabi Town

(45 min.) or from the beach at Ao Nang, at the small pavilion across from the Prah Nang Inn (20 min.). **Khlong Muang Beach** is some 25km (16 miles) from Krabi Town.

FAST FACTS: KRABI

Most services in Krabi Town are on Utarakit Road, paralleling the waterfront (to the right as you board the ferry). Here you'll find a number of **banks** with ATM service. The **post office** and **police station** (✆ **07563-7208**) are south on Utarakit Road, to the left as you leave the pier. There are also a few banks in Ao Nang, near the Phra Nang Inn.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Outside of the resorts, your dining options are just small storefront eateries and tourist cafes. In Ao Nang, try **Ao Nang Cuisine** for good Thai fare, or stop in any of the small beachside eateries. In Railay, there are lots of little beachside bars and restaurants as well.

Railay Beach

Very Expensive

Rayavadee ★★★ Rayavadee is one of the finest resorts in Thailand. Handsome two-story rounded pavilions are large and luxurious, offering every modern convenience and utmost privacy; the first-floor sitting areas have a central hanging lounger with cushions, while second-story bedrooms are all silk and teak. Private bathrooms come complete with Jacuzzi tubs and luxury products. The resort grounds lie at the base of towering cliffs on the island's most choice piece of property, a triangle of land in which each point accesses the beach. It all comes with an over-the-top price tag, though—and the sun sets the same for the bungalow dwellers next door. Still, everything at Rayavadee *is* excellent, and from your airport pickup and private boat transfer to great dining and professional service, you'll get the regal treatment.

214 Moo 2, Tambol Ao Nang, Amphur Muang, Krabi 81000 (30 min. northwest of Krabi Town by longtail boat or 70 min. from Phuket via the resort's own launch). ✆ **07562-0740.** Fax 07562-0630. www.rayavadee.com. 102 units. 35,000B ($1,000/£636) deluxe pavilion; 43,000B ($1,229/£782) hydropool pavilion; 55,000B ($1,571/£1,000) family pavilion; from 90,000B ($2,571/£1,636) specialty villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge and library; outdoor pool w/children's pool; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; air-conditioned squash court; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment and scuba center; concierge; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Sand Sea Resort (✆ **07562-2574;** www.krabisandsea.com), just next to Rayavadee, is typical of the good midrange bungalows here, with clean air-conditioned rooms from 3,550B ($101/£65). **Diamond Cave Resort** (✆ **07562-2589**), at the north end of Railay Beach, has small private bungalows with a fan from 3,400B ($97/£62). If you're looking for hotel-style accommodations, the **Railay Princess Resort & Spa** (✆ **07562-2605**) has tidy rooms overlooking the pool for 3,700B ($106/£67) in high season and 2,000B ($57/£36) in low season.

Ao Nang Beach

Very Expensive

Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Krabi Accessible only by boat, this resort sits on its own private beach (Pai Plong Bay), which is over 500m (1,640 ft.) long, and has views of limestone outcrops and gorgeous white sands. There are many types of rooms, but all are big and airy and feature ample terraces for lounging. It's certainly away from it all, but provides all the facilities guest might need, including daily newspapers

 and Wi-Fi access. There's a complimentary boat to shuttle guests to the mainland if they want to go exploring.

396-396/1 Moo 2, Ao Nang, ✆ **07563-7789.** Fax 07563-7800. www.centararesortshotels.com. 192 units. 13,000B–16,000B ($371–$457/£236–£290) double; 32,000B–55,000B ($914–$1,570/£581—£1,000) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; swimming pools; spa; fitness center; leisure boats for hire; dive and watersports center; tour desk; gift shop; salon; 24-hr. room service; Wi-Fi. *In room.* A/C, flatscreen TV, minibar, tea- and coffeemaking facilities, safe, IDD phone.

Khlong Muang Beach

Expensive

Sofitel Krabi Phokeethra Occupying a prime spot on Khlong Muang Beach, this new Sofitel property is a perfect blend of western luxury and authentic Thai atmosphere. The elegant colonial design and spacious rooms give the place an aura of sophistication and relaxation. It boasts a 7,000-sq.-m (75,347-sq.-ft.) pool, a wide range of dining and drinking choices, a fitness center, and great spa. Rooms range between 45 sq. m and 150 sq. m (484 sq. ft. and 1,615 sq. ft.) and feature teakwood floors and comfortable furnishings.

Klong Mouang Beach, Nong Talay, Krabi 81000 (15k m/9 miles north of Ao Nang, 26km/16 miles from Krabi Town). ✆ **07562-7800.** Fax 07562-7899. www.sofitel.com. 276 units. 6,450B–7,550B ($184–$215/£117–£137) double; 9,050B–1,1550B ($258–$350/£164–£210) suites. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 5 bars; outdoor pool; tennis courts; spa; fitness center; Turkish bath; children's playground; conference facilities. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, safe, IDD phone, ceiling fans.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Most head straight for the beaches to relax and play. Popular activities are day boat trips, snorkeling, and rock climbing at Railay.

Just a short tuk-tuk ride northeast of Krabi Town, however, you'll find **Wat Tham Sua (Tiger Temple),** a hilltop pilgrimage point and meditation center. The beaches and stunning cliffs of **Railay Beach** ★★ are certainly worth a day trip even if you don't stay there (see "Where to Stay & Dine," above). In the daytime, longtail boats pick up passengers at a small pavilion just across from the Phra Nang Inn for the 20-minute, 60B ($1.70/£1.10) ride. From the docks in Krabi Town, it's a 40-minute, 100B ($2.85/£1.80) ride (high season only).

The craggy karst cliffs of Railay make it one of the best-known **rock-climbing** spots in the region (if not the world). It's "sport climbing" done on mapped routes, with safety bolts already drilled into the rock; a number of companies offer full- and half-day courses. There are many routes suitable for beginners, too. Start with a lesson at **King Climbers** (✆ **07563-7125;** www.railay.com) or **Hot Rock** (✆ **07562-1771;** www.railayadventure.com). Half-day courses begin at about 1,000B ($28/£18), while full-day courses are from 1,800B ($51/£33).

If you visit Railay, don't miss secluded **Phra Nang Beach** ★, one of the most scenic beaches in Thailand. Access from Railay is by a footpath that wraps around the Rayavadee resort. Monkeys hop around the beachfront trees here; at low tide, you can walk across a sandbar to nearby **Happy Island,** which also has a number of sport-climbing routes.

Full-day **boat trips** and **snorkeling** can be arranged at any beachfront tour agent or hotel near Krabi. You'll be taken to a few small coral sites and any number of secluded coves, starting at 1,000B ($28/£18) for a half-day. Day kayak tours to outlying islands or the mangroves near **Ao Luk,** costing around 2,000B ($57/£36) per person, are also becoming popular for visitors to Ao Nang. Contact **Sea, Land & Trek Co.** (✆ **07563-7364**) or **Sea Kayak Krabi** (✆ **07563-0270**) for details.

19 KO PHI PHI ★★★

42km (26 miles) W of Krabi, 160km (99 miles) SW of Phuket

Phi Phi was devastated by the 2004 tsunami; most of the central isthmus of this tiny island was wiped out and the loss of life was considerable. Soon after the tsunami, there was talk that development would be curbed and the island would only be open to day trips. The talk was short lived, however, and nowadays Phi Phi is back and better (or worse) than ever.

Phi Phi is two islands: **Phi Phi Don** is the main barbell-shaped island whose central isthmus (the barbell handle) is packed with amenities; all visitors arrive at the busy ferry port in Phi Phi Don's Loh Dalam Bay. The sandy beaches at Ton Sai Bay, just opposite, are good for swimming. Smaller **Phi Phi Lei** is south of the main island and famed for its coveted swallow nests and the courageous pole-climbing daredevils who go get them (the nests fetch a hefty price for the making of a gourmet soup). The smaller island is protected as a natural park, but is visited as part of most day trips.

Phi Phi is where the filmmakers of *The Beach* staged their Hollywood version of tropical Utopia, and some tours will take you to Makan, the site of the filming. Small beachfront outfits rent snorkel gear and conduct longtail boat tours to quiet coves for as little as 500B ($14/£9).

GETTING THERE

Ferries make regular connections from Phuket, Krabi, and Ko Lanta. Boats from the pier in central Krabi Town run at least twice daily (usually at 10am and 3pm) for 390B ($11/£7.10). Boats from Ao Nang/Railay depart at 9am and charge 300B ($8.55/£5.45). From Phuket, ferries leave from the pier near Phuket Town at 8:30am and 1pm, with rates at around 350B ($10/£6.35). And from Ko Lanta, one boat a day leaves at 8am and costs 300B ($8.55/£5.45).

FAST FACTS: KO PHI PHI

Services on Ko Phi Phi are in Ton Sai Bay, on the central isthmus of Phi Phi Don. **Siam Commercial Bank** has an ATM; there are a number of currency-exchange booths as well. **Internet cafes** are ubiquitous and average 120B ($3.40/£2.20) per hour. A small **post office** can be found toward the middle of the village. The **tourist police** booth is next to the main pier.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Ton Sai Bay is the commercial center of Phi Phi and has been overrun with budget accommodations, turning it into a virtual backpacker ghetto. The best of the budget set are the **Phi Phi Hotel** and its sister property, the **Phi Phi Banyan Villa** (✆ **07561-1233**), with comfortable rooms starting at 1,800B ($51/£32) and 2,500B ($71/£45), respectively. The best resorts are on the isolated beaches in the northeast corner of the island and can be reached by longtail boat from Ton Sai pier. Some ferries from Krabi or Phuket will drop you off directly at your resort.

While the nicer resorts usually have the best food on the island, it's always fun to mix things up. Ton Sai Bay is developing a wide variety of dining choices. Most are simple beachside cafes, but **Le Grand Bleu,** by the main pier, stands out as the best of the bunch, serving fine French fare with a good selection of wines. For all of your bread needs, **Pee Pee Bakery** is an old standby.

Very Expensive

Zeavola ★★ The only true luxury resort on the island, Zeavola is referred to in reverential tones by the locals, and not just for its hefty price tag. Many Thais long for a return to their rural village roots, a time when life was simple. That is what Zeavola is trying to create—a return to traditional 1950s Thai living. Sand walkways cut through palm trees, and scaavola plants lead to free-standing thatch-roofed teak suites. Each is luxuriously appointed with polished teakwood floors, oversize daybeds, and both indoor and outdoor rain showers. The living areas extend past glass doors to covered teakwood patios, where privacy is supplied by electronically controlled bamboo blinds. What makes the suites truly unique, however, are the rustic flourishes: old-fashioned copper piping, wooden taps, pottery sink basins, and *mon ing* cushions (the traditional triangular Thai pillows) for the patios. This rustic theme extends to the fine hillside spa but not, for obvious reasons, to the resort's first-class PADI dive center and private dive boat. ***Hint:*** The beachfront suite trades privacy for the sea view; some garden suites have partial ocean views without the loss of privacy.

Laem Tong Beach, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi 81000. Phuket office: 111 Hongyok Utid Rd., Taladyai, Phuket 83000. ✆ **07562-7024.** Fax 07562-7025. www.zeavola.com. 52 units. 19,000B ($543/£345) village suite; 21,000B ($600/£382) garden suite; 26,000B ($743/£473) beachfront suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; saltwater pool; spa; watersports equipment; PADI dive center; tour desk; airport transfer; laundry service; Wi-Fi and broadband Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD/CD player, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Holiday Inn Resort Phi Phi Island The Holiday Inn has a lot of things going for it—a great location on beautiful Laem Tong beach, lovely manicured lawns, and hammocks gently swaying under beachfront palm trees. Unfortunately, the bungalows are rather basic and uninspired, with guesthouse-quality bathrooms. The restaurants offer decent fare, though. Bottom line: unparalleled location, but lodgings are a little lacking. Try Phi Phi Island Village (see below) first.

Laem Tong Beach, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi 81000. Phuket office: 100/435 Moo 5 Chalermprak iet Rama 9 Rd., T. Rassada, Phuket 83000. ✆ **07562-7300.** Fax 08147-63787. www.holiday-inn.com. 77 bungalows. 7,900B–9,600B ($226–$274/£144–£175) bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; fitness center; tour desk; room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, minibar, IDD phone.

Phi Phi Island Village Beach Resort & Spa ★ Set on quiet Loh Ba Kao Bay just south of Laem Tong Beach, Phi Phi Island Village offers a variety of elevated wood-and-cement huts spread among the palms. The bungalows are large and comfortable with all of the creature comforts (it's the only resort on this part of the island with satellite TV), but they're starting to show their age—just normal wear and tear—which is understandable since this was the first resort on the island. Of all of the island's resorts, this one offers the most facilities, making it thoroughly self-sufficient and the best option for an extended stay on Phi Phi.

Loh Ba Kao Bay (20 min. by longtail boat from main pier), Ko Phi Phi, Krabi 81000. Phuket office: 89 Satoon Rd., Phuket 83000. ✆ **07621-5014.** Fax 07621-4918. www.ppisland.com. 100 units. 7,700B–10,200B ($220–$291/£140–£185) bungalow; 21,000B ($600/£382) beachfront suite; 27,000B ($771/£491) pool villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; outdoor pool; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; longtail boats to main pier; PADI dive center; tour desk; babysitting; laundry service; Internet cafe. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Next to lounging on the beach, **snorkeling** and **scuba diving** are the most popular activities in and around Phi Phi. Most resorts offer free snorkeling equipment, or you can

rent from one of the storefronts on Ton Sai Bay. **Moskito Diving** (✆ **07560-1154;** www.moskitodiving.com) caters to all experience levels and offers a variety of day trips as well as live-aboards on its state-of-the-art 26m (85-ft.) dive boat. Other PADI-certified outfits include **Phi Phi Scuba** (✆ **07561-2665;** www.ppscuba.com) and **Blue View Divers** (✆ **08959-19684;** www.blueviewdivers.com).

20 KO LANTA

70km (43 miles) SE of Krabi

Small Muslim fishing villages dot the east coast of Lanta Yai (Big Lanta), a fast-developing region of the south. You'll have to cross Lanta Noi (Small Lanta) to get to the main beach areas of Lanta Yai. Business is booming, and where there were once only backpacker haunts, luxury and midrange bungalows are slowly taking over. Much of the development is taking place in the protected Moo Ko Lanta National Marine Park, meaning that the new construction must meet environmental impact standards. Local laws also govern the height and size of new resorts, an attempt to keep the island looking as natural as possible.

GETTING THERE

Minivans from Krabi Town and Trang make connections to Lanta; the cost is from 250B ($7.15/£4.55) for bus/boat/bus door-to-door service. After two short ferry crossings, most transport stops in **Saladan,** near the ferry pier on the northern tip of Lanta Yai. In the high season, daily ferries connect Ko Lanta with Ko Phi Phi (300B/$8.55/£5.45). You can also connect with Phuket via Phi Phi. In the low season, minivan or an expensive chartered boat is your only option.

WHERE TO STAY

Very Expensive

On developing Phra Ae Beach (Long Beach), **Layana Resort & Spa** (272 Moo 3 Saladan; ✆ **07560-7100;** www.layanaresort.com) offers first-class accommodations and is the best on the beach. Luxury pavilions and suites start at 10,500B ($300/£191).

Pimalai Resort & Spa ★★ From Krabi Town or the airport, you can ride in style: first by luxury van, then by picturesque private boat ride directly to the resort in high season (a short four-wheel-drive ride to another pier in low season). Getting here is an adventure in itself that pays dividends when you check in to your own room. A fine marriage of comfort and proximity to nature, the large, free-standing villas are partly walled compounds with rooms done in hardwoods and luxurious bathrooms with outdoor showers. Each unit has a large veranda, some overlooking the sea or at least in earshot of the crashing surf of the picturesque beach below (a good swimming beach). The high-end suites are spectacular. The resort is thoroughly self-contained, with a library, beautiful spa, and good day trips.

99 Moo 5, Ba Kan Tiang Beach, Lanta Yai Island, Krabi 81150 (on the far southeast coast of Lanta Yai). ✆ **07560-7999.** Fax 07560-7998. www.pimalai.com. 121 units. 12,000B–16,000B ($343–$457/£218–£291) double; 24,000B–34,000B ($686–$971/£436–£618) pavilion suite; from 33,000B ($943/£600) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 5 bars; pool; fitness center; spa w/massage; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment; dive center; mountain-bike rental; tour desk; car rental; limo transfer; business center w/Internet access; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; library w/good book selection. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV (some w/DVD players), minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Budget accommodations along the west coast of Lanta are basic bungalows starting as low as 300B ($8.55/£5.45); keep an eye out for new hotels springing up. **Moonlight Bay Resort** (69 Moo 8, Klongtob; ✆ **07568-4401**) is one of the better bungalow resorts and offers cozy accommodations and basic services starting at 3,000B ($86/£55).

21 AN INTRODUCTION TO CENTRAL THAILAND

Going north from Bangkok, travelers tracing the route of the Chao Phraya River travel back in time as they push upstream and beyond. Starting with the ruins of **Ayutthaya** (see "Side Trips from Bangkok," p. 107), you travel through the vast Central Plain to the nation's greatest architectural wonder, **Sukhothai,** which was the very founding point of the Thai kingdom in 1238. Even farther north is the land of Lanna and the distinct ancient kingdom once centered around Chiang Mai (covered in section 24, below).

Phitsanulok, 377km (234 miles) north of Bangkok, is the commercial hub of the region, but despite a visit to the town's noted **Wat Yai,** an important Thai pilgrimage temple, most travelers just pass through on their way to Sukhothai. The **Phitsanulok Station** (✆ **05525-8005**) is served by regular rail connection from Bangkok's **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334). If you're stuck for the night, try **Topland Hotel** (68/33 Akathodsarod St.; ✆ **05524-7800;** www.toplandhotel.com), with rooms going for 2,000B ($57/£36).

22 SUKHOTHAI ★★★ & SI SATCHANALAI ★

Sukhothai: 427km (265 miles) N of Bangkok, 58km (36 miles) E of Phitsanulok; Si Satchanalai: 56km (35 miles) N of Sukhothai

The emergence of Sukhothai (which means "Dawn of Happiness" in Pali) in 1238 as an independent political state signified the birth of the first unified kingdom now known as Thailand. Today, Sukhothai is the country's best-known historical site; it is to Thailand what Angkor Wat is to Cambodia.

New Sukhothai, built along the banks of the Yom River, is the access point for the main attraction, **Sukhothai Historical Park** (or Muang Kao, which means Old City), situated some 12km (7½ miles) west of the town center.

Si Satchanalai Historical Park, also along the Yom River, is 56km (35 miles) north of New Sukhothai. Another legacy of the Sukhothai Kingdom, the ancient city is crumbling—but that's part of its charm, and it's certainly worth the 1-day detour. If you're traveling from Phitsanulok, the drive takes you across wide plains of rice paddies, cotton fields, and mango and lemon groves—a glimpse into another era.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Bangkok Airways** has a private airport near Sukhothai, with at least one daily flight connecting Sukhothai with Bangkok. For information, call ✆ **02265-5678** in Bangkok or ✆ **05564-7224** at the Sukhothai airport.

Tips Special Event

Loi Krathong is a visually delightful 3-day festival held nationwide on the full moon of the 12th lunar month—usually in October or November—in honor of the water spirits. Crowds gather at ponds, canals, rivers, and temple fountains to float small banana-leaf boats bearing candles, incense, a flower, and a coin in offering to wash away the past year's sins. Since this festival dates from the Sukhothai era, celebrations are especially widespread throughout the province.

BY TRAIN The nearest railway station is at Phitsanulok (see above). From Phitsanulok's intercity bus terminal on Hwy. 12, buses leave hourly for the 1-hour trip to New Sukhothai (54B/$1.55/£1).

BY BUS Three daily air-conditioned buses leave from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**) for the 7-hour trip (295B/$8.40/£5.35). Four daily air-conditioned buses leave from Chiang Mai's **Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**) for the 5½-hour trip (274B/$7.80/£5).

The Sukhothai bus station is about 3km (2 miles) west of New Sukhothai. Public *songtao* charge 20B (55¢/35p) for the ride to Old Sukhothai.

BY CAR Take Singhawat Road east from Phitsanulok, then Hwy. 12.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Sukhothai Heritage Resort (999 Moo 2, Tambon Klongkrajong, Sukhothai 64100; ✆ **05564-7655;** www.sukhothaiheritage.com) is located next to the airport, in an idyllic rural setting about 20km (12 miles) from the town. Well-equipped rooms, all with a view of the pool, start at 3,500B ($100/£64). In New Sukhothai, **Lotus Village** (170 Ratchathanee St.; ✆ **05562-1484**) has basic fan and air-conditioned rooms from 900B ($26/£16) and 1,200B ($34/£22), respectively. You can also contact the guesthouse for drivers and certified park guides.

In the superinexpensive category, **Ban Thai Guesthouse** (38 Pravet Nakhon Rd.; west side of Yom River; ✆ **05561-0163**) is a collection of A-frame teak bungalows starting from just 250B ($7.15/£4.55). It's quite basic, but a good place to get useful local info.

Like most small cities and towns in Thailand, you can find good eats at the central market from early 'til late. **Dream Cafe** (86/1 Singhawat Rd.; ✆ **05561-2081**) is a great choice, with fine, funky Thai atmosphere and great eats.

EXPLORING SUKHOTHAI ★★★

Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991, the Sukhothai Historical Park has been restored and maintained by the government's Fine Arts Department to make the monuments accessible to the public.

You can reach the historic park of Sukhothai by public bus, three-wheeled motorcycle taxi *(samlor),* or private car. The *samlor* that cruise around New Sukhothai can be hired to trek you out to the monuments and take you for a 4-hour tour around the park for about 500B ($14/£9).

The historical park is open daily from 6am to 6pm. Purchase a combination ticket with admission to the National Museum, Historical Park (all areas), and Si Satchanalai

 Historical Park for 150B ($4.30/£2.70)—a good value. A basic map is available at the museum, but better maps are to be found at the bike-rental shops near the entrance. Since the site is too spread out for walking, it's best to either go by guided tour in a car, *samlor,* or rented bicycle (available at the entrance). There are also tram tours.

A network of walls and moats defines the perfect rectangle that is the central city. The **Ramkhamhaeng National Museum,** with its detailed models and artifacts from the site, is a good place to start. **Wat Mahathat,** composed of several small towers and *chedis,* is an imposing monument and the site's most important. Don't miss the fine relief work on the southeast corner. The 15m (49 ft.) seated Buddha at **Wat Sri Chum,** located to the northwest of the old city, is one of the nation's most evocative and photogenic sights. Don't miss the temples, pottery kilns, and small pilgrimage mounds outside the city walls. A visit to **Sri Satchanalai,** some 56km (35 miles) north, makes for a good day trip.

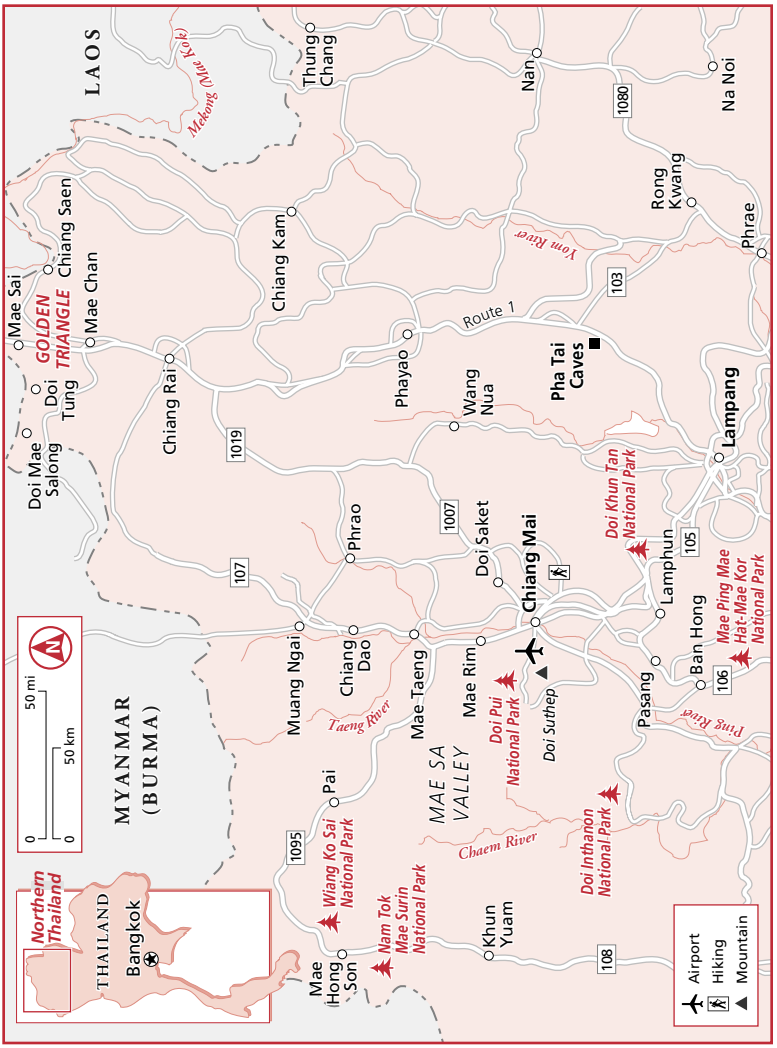
23 AN INTRODUCTION TO NORTHERN THAILAND

If lazy beach days aren't your thing, the historic cities of **Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai,** and the small but interesting **Golden Triangle** (Sop Ruak), a former center of the opium trade, are a welcome change for visitors who want to experience Thailand's rugged rural beauty.

The majority of northern Thais trace their heritage to the Tai people who migrated from southern China in waves between the 1st and 8th centuries. King Mengrai, a brilliant leader who united the Tai tribes, established the first capital of the Lanna Kingdom at Chiang Rai in 1262. It was about this time that Kublai Khan invaded Burma. For added protection, King Mengrai forged ties with the Sukhothai Kingdom to the south, and in 1296 he moved his capital to Chiang Mai. For the next century, the Lanna Kingdom absorbed most of the northern provinces and, in alliance with the Sukhothai, held off invasion from the Mons and Khmers. After taking control of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya tried to conquer Chiang Mai and failed each time. The Lanna Kingdom enjoyed wealth and power until 1556, when the Burmese captured the capital. It remained in their hands until 1775, when King Taskin (of Ayutthaya) took it for Siam.

North of Chiang Mai and its satellite cities, travelers enter a mountainous region that promises lots of adventure. Rugged hills, proximity to Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, and the diverse ethnic hill-tribe groups living here distinguish northern Thailand from the rest of the country. The mighty Mekong River flows southeast from the Golden Triangle, the former opium-producing region straddling Myanmar and Laos, and the river traces a path along dense jungles and teak forests. This is the land of the elephants, ancient Lanna culture, backwater border towns, and adventure around every turn.

Northern Thailand is home to the majority of Thailand's more than half a million members of **ethnic hill tribes,** which are classified in six primary groups: the Karen, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong (Meo), and Mien (Yao), each with subgroups that are linked by history, lineage, language, costume, social organization, and religion. With close ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties to the cultures of their Lao, Chinese, Burmese, and Tibetan ancestors and neighbors, each group retains, to this day, traditional costume, religion, art, and daily practices.



Keep in mind that November through May are the best months for trekking, with March and April (when southern Thailand gets extremely hot) usually being the least crowded months. ***Trekkers beware:*** During the rainy season, June through October, paths become mudslides due to frequent showers, and leeches abound.

24 CHIANG MAI ★★★

Chiang Mai (New City) was founded in 1296 by King Mengrai as the capital of the first independent Thai state, Lanna (Kingdom of One Million Rice Fields). It became the cultural and religious center of the northern Tai, those who had migrated from southern China to dwell in Thailand, and remained through the turbulent period of recurring Burmese attacks. The Burmese were occupiers; in fact, Burmese influence on culture is still strong. Ongoing Thai-Burmese conflicts led to alliances with Siam and, in 1932, the province became an integral part of the Kingdom of Siam.

These days, Chiang Mai is a booming town of some 200,000 people (in a province of some 1.6 million). Most residents are native born, but there are an increasing number of transplants from Bangkok drawn to the slower pace and friendly locals. Chiang Mai's heart is the Old City, an area surrounded by vestiges of walls and moats originally constructed for defense; yet Chiang Mai is also a modern city with a growing infrastructure of modern shopping malls and condominiums. The contrast is part of the town's charm.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Lao Airlines** (✆ **05322-3401**) connects Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang five times each week, while **Air Asia** (✆ **05392-2170**) has daily flights to Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). **Silk Air** (✆ **05390-4985**), the regional arm of Singapore Airlines, connects with Singapore.

Within Thailand, **Thai Airways** (240 Propokklao Rd.; ✆ **05392-0920**), **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **053281-519,** or 02265-5678 in Bangkok), and budget carriers **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999** in Bangkok) and **Nok Air** (✆ **02900-9955**) fly from Bangkok to Chiang Mai daily (trip time: 1 hr., 10 min.) and make regional connections.

The **Chiang Mai International Airport** has several banks for changing money, a post and overseas call office, and an information booth. Taxis from the airport charge a flat 120B ($3.40/£2.20) to town. Buy a ticket from the taxi booth in the arrivals hall, and then proceed to the taxi queue.

BY TRAIN Of the seven daily trains from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, the 8:30am Sprinter (trip time: 12 hr.) is the quickest, but you sacrifice a whole day to travel and spend the entire trip in a seat. A second-class air-conditioned seat will run 611B ($18/£11). Other trains take between 13 and 15 hours. For overnight trips, second-class sleeper berths are a good choice, costing 881B ($25/£16) for a lower berth with air-conditioning, 791B ($23/£14) for an upper berth with air-conditioning. In Bangkok, contact **Hua Lampong Railway Station** (✆ **1690** or 02220-4334) up to 90 days in advance. For local train information in Chiang Mai, call ✆ **05324-5363.** Reservations cannot be made over the phone, but you can check availability.

BY BUS Buses from Bangkok to Chiang Mai are many and varied—from rattle-trap, open-air numbers to fully reclining VIP vehicles. The trip takes about 10 hours. From Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**), there are numerous departures (868B/$25/£16 for VIP bus). There's also frequent service between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, Phitsanulok, and Chiang Rai.

Chiang Mai's **Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**) is on Kaeo Nawarat Road, 3km (2 miles) northeast of Tha Pae Gate; some buses arrive at **Chang Puak Station** (✆ **05321-1586**), north of Chang Puak Gate on Chotana Road.

GETTING AROUND

The heart of Chiang Mai is the **Old City,** completely surrounded by a moat and a few remains of the massive wall, laid out in a square aligned with the cardinal directions. Several of the original gates have been restored and serve as handy reference points, particularly **Tha Pae Gate** to the east. All major streets radiate from the Old City.

The main business and shopping area is the 1km (1/2-mile) stretch between the east side of the Old City and the **Ping River.** Here you will find the Night Bazaar, many shops, trekking agents, hotels, and restaurants. To the west of town and visible from anywhere in the city is the imposing wall of **Doi Suthep** mountain, where, at its crest, you'll find the most regal of all Chiang Mai Buddhist compounds, **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep.**

BY SONGTAO *Songtao* (covered pickups) cover all routes. These red pickup trucks fitted with two long bench seats are also known locally as *seelor* (four wheels). Hail one going in your general direction and tell the driver your destination. (***Tip:*** Have your hotel or guesthouse concierge write your destination in Thai before you head out.) Ask the price and bargain hard.

BY TUK-TUK The ubiquitous tuk-tuk (motorized three-wheeler) is the next best option to the *songtao.* Fares are negotiable—you will have to bargain hard to get a good rate—but expect to pay at least 40B ($1.15/70p) for any ride.

BY CAR **Avis** (✆ **05320-1798**) has an office conveniently located at the airport, while **Budget** (✆ **05320-2871**) will deliver; prices start at around 1,000B ($28/£18). **North Wheels** (70/4-8 Moonmuang Rd.; ✆ **05387-4478**) is a good choice and typical of the more budget services in town.

BY MOTORCYCLE Many guesthouses along the Ping River and shops along Chaiyaphum Road (east of Tha Pae Gate in the Old City) rent 100cc to 150cc motorcycles for about 150B ($4.30/£2.70) per day (with discounts for longer periods); 250cc Hondas (and larger) are also available. Wear a helmet.

BY BICYCLE Cycling in the city is fun and practical, especially for getting around to the temples within the Old City. Bikes are available at any of the many guesthouses in or around the Old City; they go for about 50B ($1.40/90p) per day.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** office is at 105/1 Chiang Mai-Lamphun Rd. (✆ **05324-8604**), 400m (1,312 ft.) south of the Nawarat Bridge on the east side of the Ping River. Around town, you can find lots of free local magazines with maps and lists of events.

Fast Facts Chiang Mai

Bookstores **Backstreet Books** (✆ **05387-4143**) and **Gecko Books** (✆ **05387-4066**) are neighbors on Chang Moi Kao, a side street north of eastern Tha Pae Road just before it meets the city wall. Both have a good selection of new and used books and do exchanges at the usual rate: two for one, depending on the condition. **Bookzone** (318 Tha Pae Rd.; ✆ **05325-2418**) is strong on guidebooks and Thai culture. The **Suriwong Book Centre** (54/1–5 Sridonchai Rd.; ✆ **05328-1052**) also has a comprehensive selection of English-language books.

Consulates **U.S.:** 387 Wichayanond Rd. (✆ **05325-2629**). **Canada:** 151 Chiang Mai–Lampang Superhighway, T. Tahsala (✆ **05385-0147**). **Australia:** 165 Sirimangklachan Rd. (✆ **05349-2480**). **U.K.:** 198 Bumrungraj Rd. (✆ **05326-3015**).

Currency Exchange For convenient bank ATMs and money changers, go to Chang Klan Road and Charoen Prathet Road, around the Night Bazaar.

Emergencies In case of emergency, dial ✆ **1699** to reach the tourist police.

Hospitals Chiang Mai hospitals offer excellent emergency and general care, with English-speaking nurses and physicians. The best private hospital is **McCormick,** on Kaeo Nawarat Road (✆ **05326-2200**), out toward the Arcade Bus Terminal.

Internet Access In the Old City, there are numerous small, inexpensive cafes with service sometimes costing only 15B (40¢/25p) per hour. Many hotels and restaurants also provide free Internet service for guests and customers.

Mail The most convenient branch is at 186/1 Chang Klan Rd. (✆ **05327-3657**). The general post office is on Charoen Muang (✆ **05324-1070**), near the train station.

WHERE TO STAY

Near the Ping River

Very Expensive

The Chedi, Chiang Mai ★★ When you first see it, the Chedi resembles a fortress with windowless, wood-clad walls providing protection from the onslaught of tuk-tuks and noise beyond. However, the interior reveals a sleek modern hideaway with little to remind you that you are in fact still in Chiang Mai. Reflecting pools and manicured gardens line an inner courtyard dominated by an 80-year-old white washed colonial building. Formerly the British consulate, it now houses the hotel's bar and restaurant and provides a welcome charm to the otherwise stark exterior architecture. Airy rooms are decorated in a chic contemporary Asian style that is more focused on "contemporary" than "Asian." Stunning black-marble bathrooms open up to the bedroom by way of folding teak doors, and balconies overlook a riverfront swimming pool surrounded by lotus ponds (try for a fourth-floor room for the best view). Added perks such as butler service, complimentary minibar, and free laundry service make the very spacious suites worth the steep price tag.

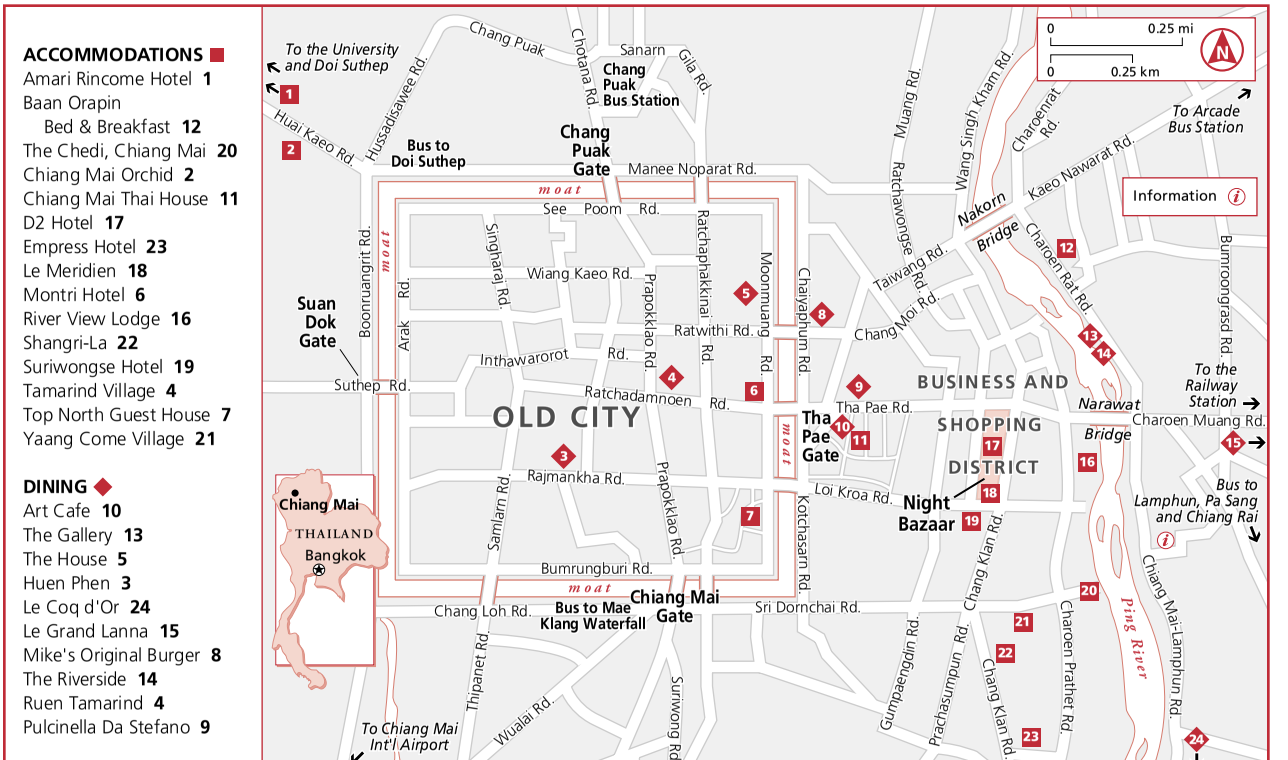
123 Charoen Prathet Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (on the river 5 blocks south of Tha Pae Rd.). ✆ **05325-3333.** Fax 05325-3352. www.ghmhotels.com. 84 units. 11,440B ($327/£208) deluxe; 17,200B ($491/£313) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; boutique; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi and broadband Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

D2 Hotel ★★ The Dusit hotel chain is trying to appeal to a younger, hipper crowd by updating its image; this "lifestyle hotel" is one of its first efforts at capturing the demographic. From the lobby to the restaurants to the guest rooms, every corner of the hotel is bathed in a postmodern minimalist cool. Oranges and browns are the dominant colors, and the furniture and decor seamlessly blend sharp lines with rounded edges—everything flows. More important, the style of the furnishings does not translate into a lack of comfort. Rooms are very livable and have all the finer creature comforts: daybeds,

ACCOMMODATIONS ■
Amari Rincome Hotel **1**
Baan Orapin Bed & Breakfast **12**
The Chedi, Chiang Mai **20**
Chiang Mai Orchid **2**
Chiang Mai Thai House **11**
D2 Hotel **17**
Empress Hotel **23**
Le Meridien **18**
Montri Hotel **6**
River View Lodge **16**
Shangri-La **22**
Suriwongse Hotel **19**
Tamarind Village **4**
Top North Guest House **7**
Yaang Come Village **21**

DINING ◆
Art Cafe **10**
The Gallery **13**
The House **5**
Huen Phen **3**
Le Coq d'Or **24**
Le Grand Lanna **15**
Mike's Original Burger **8**
The Riverside **14**
Ruen Tamarind **4**
Pulcinella Da Stefano **9**



flatscreen TVs with DVD players, and well-stocked bathrooms. An upgrade to the club deluxe level allows access to the chic club lounge, with free cocktails and Internet service. Dusit's famous Devarana Spa is the one part of the hotel that retains the traditional Thai elegance. The hotel's staff exudes a laid-back cool, but is very attentive and helpful.

100 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (2 blocks south of Tha Pae Rd., 2 blocks west of river, just north of Night Bazaar). ✆ **05399-9999.** Fax 05399-9900. www.dusit.com. 131 units. 4,500B ($129/£82) deluxe; 5,670B ($162/£103) club deluxe; from 6,750B ($193/£123) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa; concierge; car rental; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Le Meridien With an ideal location on Changklan Road, right next to the Night Bazaar, this place is an imposing new presence in central Chiang Mai. With typical Le Meridien flair, the design both outside and inside is very pleasing on the eye, and the spacious and well-lit rooms are packed with state-of-the-art furnishings and fittings, including high-definition TVs and high-speed Internet access. The muted earth tones of the decor are very restful, and some upper-floor rooms have wonderful views of the nearby mountain, Doi Suthep. The hotel's restaurants and bars offer an appetizing array of culinary delights, exotic cocktails, and fruit infusions.

108 Changklan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05325-3666.** www.starwood hotels.com. 384 units 5,000B–8,000B ($142–$228/£90–£145) double; 9,000B–12,000B ($257–$342/£163–£218) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; spa; pool; fitness facility; sauna; limo service; gift shop; babysitting; laundry; dry cleaning; wheelchair access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Shangri-La Located in a lush garden setting in the heart of the city's business district, the Shangri-La is a city resort designed to facilitate both business and leisure for visitors. It is just a 10-minute ride from the city's airport and within easy reach of all major sights, and combines a broad range of facilities such as the CHI Spa with Shangri-La's inimitable service. They offer special packages for honeymooners and golfers, as well as excellent dining and drinking options. Ask for a room with a mountain view.

89/8 Changklan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05325-3888.** Fax 05325-3800. www.shangri-la.com. 281 units. 9,700B ($277/£176) double; 20,000B–30,000B ($571–$857/£363–£545) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; swimming pool; putting green; tennis court; spa; kids' corner; limo service; business center; salon; babysitting; conference rooms. *In room:* A/C, high-speed Internet access, minibar, tea- and coffeemaking facilities, safe.

Yaang Come Village ★ Named after the massive 40-year-old yaang tree that provides shade for the reception area, the Yaang Come is a small oasis in developing Chiang Mai. The idea behind the resort is to re-create the feel of a traditional Thai Lue village (the Thai Lue migrated from Yunnan Province to northern Thailand 200 years ago). While Jacuzzis and wireless Internet access are not regular features of Thai Lue villages, the resort does have a laid-back charm. The lavishly decorated open-air reception leads to an inner courtyard dominated by a swimming pool and Jacuzzi. Flanking the pool area are the guest rooms, which are housed in brick buildings with Lanna-style roofs. All are well appointed with red-tile floors, balconies, glossy tile bathrooms, and wall murals painted by artisans from nearby Nan province. The hotel is tucked away from the bustle of the Night Bazaar, yet still within striking distance of the action.

90/3 Sri Dornchai Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (btw. Chang Klan and Charoen Prathet roads, midway btw. Old City and river). ✆ **05323-7222.** Fax 05323-7230. www.yaangcome.com. 42 units. 6,000B–7,000B ($171–$200/£109–£127) double; 9,000B ($257/£164) family room; 15,000B ($429/£273) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool and Jacuzzi; tour desk; car rental; limo service; massage; laundry service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Moderate

Baan Orapin Bed & Breakfast ★★ (Finds) For those looking for a more intimate and personal stay in Chiang Mai, the Baan Orapin is a real gem. Owned and operated by Khun Opas Chao, who spent more than a decade studying and working in the U.S. and U.K., the hotel is set on land that has been in his family for more than 100 years. Two-story Lanna-style buildings surround the 90-year-old mansion and attached gardens. While the rooms and suites are rustic in comparison with the larger resorts and hotels, they are stylish and extremely clean, with sturdy teakwood furniture, mosquito netting for the beds, and handicrafts to add some local flavor. Large bathrooms are outfitted in beautifully polished, locally made green-and-blue tiling. Khun Opas is a wealth of information about the town and its history; he and his staff will bend over backward to attend to your every need.

150 Charoenraj Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (east side of river, north of Nara watt Bridge). ✆ **05324-3677.** Fax 05324-7142. www.baanorapin.com. 15 units. 2,400B ($69/£44) superior; from 2,800B ($80/£51) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small swimming pool; tour desk; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Empress Hotel ★ This 17-story tower, opened in 1990, is south of the main business and tourist area, which makes it especially quiet. The hotel has all the amenities and—even when swarming with tourist groups—doesn't seem overrun. The impressive public spaces are decorated with elaborate gem-encrusted stupas and golden elephant statues. Large guest rooms with picture windows are done in a tasteful, modern interpretation of Asian decor in rose and peach tones. Bathrooms are small, but decked out in marble and stocked with good complimentary amenities. Deluxe rooms are done in beiges and dark reds with polished wood floors and understated Lanna artwork—very classy. Ask to be on the mountain side; there are nice views from upper floors.

199/42 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (15-min. walk south of Night Bazaar, 2 blocks from river). ✆ **05327-0240.** Fax 05327-2467. www.empresshotels.com. 375 units. 3,591B ($103/£65) double; 4,070B ($116/£74) deluxe; from 6,548B ($187/£119) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge and disco; pool; fitness center w/sauna; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms; Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

River View Lodge ★★ River View has a great location and is the kind of place that people return to again and again (well-known guide-map maker Nancy Chandler, for instance, makes this her home when she is researching). The hotel's riverside locale makes for a peaceful retreat, and yet it's only a short hop to the city's main business and shopping district. What with the quaint, shady garden, small but cozy riverside pool, open-air cafe, and quiet sitting areas scattered about, there's a good laid-back vibe here. The staff is friendly enough, and informed if a bit "eccentric," to give it a word. Large guest rooms have fresh terra-cotta tile floors with simple wood furnishings and no-fuss decor set against one wall of red-brick facing. Some units have balconies as well. Bathrooms have shower stalls only.

25 Charoen Prathet Rd., Soi 2, Chiang Mai 50100 (on river 2 blocks south of Tha Pae Rd.). ✆ **05327-1109.** Fax 05327-9019. www.riverviewlodgch.com. 36 units. $41–$51 (£27–£34) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small pool; laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

Suriwongse Hotel ★ For the shopper or party animal looking to be close to the Night Bazaar area, this hotel is tops. The hardwood paneling in the lobby lends warmth to the place. Spacious, teak-trimmed rooms have clean carpet and firm beds, and are done in cool off-white and pastels (if you can ignore the red bordello drapes). Higher-priced rooms have similar amenities but offer a balcony and better views. The town's McDonald's and Starbucks franchises are both within a stone's throw.

110 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (corner of Loi Kroa Rd., just southwest of Night Bazaar, halfway btw. Old City and river). ✆ **05327-0051.** Fax 05327-0063. www.suriwongsehotels.com. 190 units. 2,400B–3,500B ($69–$100/£44–£64) double; from 4,800B ($137/£87) suite. Seasonal rates available. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; pool; tour desk; business center; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Chiang Mai Thai House ★★ Value Set on a quiet *soi* 2 blocks from Tha Pae Gate and a 10-minute walk to the Night Bazaar, the Thai House is somewhere between a guesthouse and a hotel. Opened in 2005, the rooms and bathrooms (the all-in-one shower variety) are spotless, and a quick perusal of the house rules shows management is dead set on keeping them that way. Spacious air-conditioned rooms have wood floors and small fridges, with first-floor air-conditioning units sporting an attached small garden sitting area. Fan rooms are just as spacious and a good choice during the cooler months. Hallway balconies overlook the relaxing pool area. The tour desk can help book excursions ranging from rafting and cycling to all-day cooking classes. The restaurant serves decent Thai fare. Overall, this is a great value.

5/1 Tha Pae Rd., Soi 5, Chiang Mai 50100 (2 blocks east of Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05390-4110.** Fax 05390-4110, ext. 200. www.chiangmaithaihouse.com. 38 units. 550B ($16/£10) double with fan; from 950B ($27/£17) double with A/C. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small outdoor pool; tour desk; laundry service; computer room. *In room:* TV, Internet access, IDD phone.

In the Old City

Moderate

Tamarind Village ★★ Passing down a long, shaded lane lined with new-growth bamboo, follow meandering walkways among the white washed buildings of this stylish little hideaway in the heart of the Old City. It's hard to believe that you're in Chiang Mai. Rooms at the Tamarind are marvels of concrete flatwork burnished to an almost shining glow. Complemented by straw mats and chic contemporary Thai furnishings, they make for a pleasing, minimalist feel (if you're a minimalist, that is). Bathrooms are spacious, with double doors connecting to the vaulted-ceilinged guest rooms. There's an almost Mediterranean feel to the whole complex, what with all of the arched, covered terra-cotta walks joining buildings in a village-style layout. The village also has a full-service spa with Jacuzzi and sauna facilities. Add that to the already excellent poolside restaurant, **Ruen Tamarind** (see "Where to Dine," below), and you have the makings of a unique city resort.

50/1 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Sri Phoom, Chiang Mai 50200 (a short walk toward the center of the Old City from Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05341-8896.** Fax 05341-8900. www.tamarindvillage.com. 45 units. 6,000B ($171/£109) double; 8,000B ($229/£145) deluxe; 14,000B ($400/£255) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Montri Hotel ★ Value The earliest address of note for foreigners in Chiang Mai, the Montri is still a convenient, inexpensive gem located just inside the Old City and across from Tha Pae Gate. Renovated rooms with built-in cabinets, valances, and new furniture are attractive, comfortable, and a very good value; the rest are pretty basic cells, though comfy and clean. Dark parquet floors are standard throughout, and bathrooms are of the shower-in-room style. Ask for a back-facing room; you'll get more peace, and from higher floors can see Doi Suthep. If you're arriving by plane, make sure you request a free airport transfer when you make your booking.

2–6 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (just northwest across from Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05321-1069.** Fax 05321-7416. 75 units. 900B ($26/£16) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; small business center; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Top North Guest House South of Tha Pae and down one of the Old City's narrow lanes, laid-back Top North is comfortable and affordable. The small central pool is a find in this category and is a popular hangout for backpackers going upscale. There are many room standards, all with high ceilings. Top-category units (500B/$14/£9.10) are large and clean, with tile floors and bathrooms with tubs. Time is not kind to budget hotels, however, and some of the furnishings look like they've gone a few rounds with an angry, caged ape. Rooms on the lower echelon vary in price and amenities (with or without air-conditioning or TV), but all at least have hot-water showers. Top North's extras include a good tour operation, an Internet cafe, and a bar that shows DVDs in the evenings. Its sister property, **Top North Hotel** (✆ **05327-9623-5**), is an old standby just south of the Tha Pae Gate within the Old City; it offers a slightly higher class of rooms at slightly higher rates.

15 Moon Muang Rd., Soi 2, Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05327-8684.** Fax 05327-8485. www.topnorthgroup.com. 90 units. 400B ($11/£7.25) double with fan; 500B ($14/£9.10) double with A/C. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; bike and motorcycle rental; tour desk; laundry service; Internet cafe. *In room:* A/C, TV.

West Side/University Area

Expensive/Moderate

Amari Rincome Hotel ★ This tranquil hotel complex is a favorite because of its elegant, yet traditional, Thai atmosphere. The public spaces are decorated with local handicrafts, and the professional staff wears intricately embroidered costumes. Superior rooms are elaborately adorned with Burmese tapestries and carved-wood accents in local style, but are looking a little worn. Renovated deluxe rooms are more in keeping with Amari's high standards: business beiges with plush carpeting and modern Lanna decorations. There is a gorgeous garden and pool area, the dining at La Gritta is great, and the hotel is near some of the better upscale shops and galleries in town. The staff is as professional as they come, will know your name from the moment you cross the threshold, and can help with any eventuality (tours, transport, and so on).

1 Nimmanhaemin Rd., off Huay Kaeo Rd., Chiang Mai 50200 (near superhighway northwest of Old City). ✆ **05322-1130.** Fax 05322-1915. www.amari.com. 158 units. 2,874B ($82/£52) superior; 4,403B ($126/£80) deluxe; 11,880B ($339/£216) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; 2 outdoor pools; outdoor floodlit tennis court; concierge; tour desk; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Chiang Mai Orchid ★ The Orchid has attractive facilities and friendly service and is just next to one of the town's most popular hangouts, the Kad Suan Kaew (Central) shopping complex. Spacious, quiet rooms are pleasantly decorated with local woodcarvings. The lobby and other public spaces are furnished with clusters of chic, low-slung rattan couches and decorated with flowers. The Orchid covers all the bases in terms of amenities, including dining, car rental, and a knowledgeable tour desk.

23 Huai Kaeo Rd., Chiang Mai 50200 (northwest of Old City, next door to Kad San Kaew/Central shopping complex). ✆ **05322-2099.** Fax 05322-1625. www.chiangmaiorchid.com. 266 units. $70–$88 (£47–£59) double; from $225 (£150) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge and pub; outdoor pool; fitness center; sauna; children's playground; tour desk; car rental; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge.

Sankamphaeng Road

Very Expensive

Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, Chiang Mai ★★★ The same folks who set the standard for riverside luxury in their historic property in Bangkok have now brought an ultraluxe resort to Chiang Mai. Lying east of town off the busy Sankamphaeng Road, the resort is intended to be a living museum, re-creating a traditional Lanna palace and its attendant village. Upon arrival, a horse-drawn cart whisks you across a moat into the miniature city, dropping you off at the lavishly decorated lobby. A reproduction of a Burmese palace, it is quite impressive and—like the nearby spa, a teakwood extravagance modeled after the Mandalay Palace—wholly unique in a resort setting. Accommodations are of the suite-only variety, roughly divided between the villas and pavilions and the colonial suites. Arranged like miniature Lanna villages, the villa and pavilion suites surround verdant compounds of rice terraces and gardens that are worked daily by a family of buffalo. Villa suites are grand, two-story teakwood rice barns, while pavilion suites are impressive takes on traditional Thai houses, each incorporating different ethnic influences on Lanna architecture. All have attached Thai-style *salas* and are appointed as if for royalty, in rich teak, silk, and all the finest fittings.The newest suites borrow heavily from 19th-century English and Burmese colonial style. Pastel tones, chandeliers dangling from towering ceilings, and stunning open-plan marble bathrooms give these rooms a sense of refinement unmatched in Chiang Mai. To take a simple stroll through the grounds is to be bombarded with the history of Lanna architecture and culture. If your head starts to spin, a cultural expert is available to give guided tours.

51/4 Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd., Moo 1 T Tasala, Chiang Mai 50000. ✆ **05388-8888.** Fax 05388-8999. www.mandarinoriental.com. 123 units. 18,999B–21,099B ($543–$603/£345–£384) colonial suite; 18,299B–40,999B ($523–$1,171/£333–£745) villa; from 58,000B ($1,657/£1,055) residence; 280,000B ($8,000/£5,091) royal villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; tennis court; health club; extensive spa; children's center; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping village; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; cooking school; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Outside Chiang Mai

Very Expensive

Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai ★★★ Northern Thailand's finest resort is isolated from the bustle of the city on 8 hectares (20 acres) of landscaped grounds in the Mae Rim Valley. The beautiful central area features terraced rice paddies and even a resident family of water buffalo used to work the fields. Two-story Lanna-style pavilions overlook the tranquil scenery. Spacious suites are understatedly elegant with polished teak floors and vaulted ceilings, decorated with traditional Thai fabrics and art, each with an adjoining private *sala.* Bathrooms are particularly large and luxurious. The pool is a spectacle with a vanishing edge overlooking fields and mountains. At night, torches are lit in those fields, lending a mysterious air to the views from the resort's restaurants. The location gives full access to the picturesque Mae Rim Valley, which guests can explore by borrowing a complimentary mountain bike. If you're worried about being far from Chiang Mai, there are regular shuttles to and from the main business and shopping district. There's even a fine cooking school. The *pièce de résistance* is the luxurious Lanna Spa, which offers a standard of luxury and service without rival in the region.

Mae Rim–Samoeng Old Rd., Mae Rim, Chiang Mai 50180 (20 min. north of city off Chiang Mai–Mae Rim Rd.). ✆ **800/819-5053** in the U.S., or 05329-8181. Fax 05329-8190. www.fourseasons.com/chiangmai. 80 units. 19,500B–26,000B ($557–$743/£355–£473) pavilion suite; from 112,500B ($3,214/£2,045) residence suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 pools; 2 outdoor floodlit grass tennis courts; fitness

center w/sauna and steam; spa w/steam, massage, and salon; complimentary mountain bikes; children's activities; concierge; car rental; shuttle to town; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Northern-style cuisine is strongly influenced by the Burmese and ethnic minorities who live in the area. Among the most distinctive northern Thai dishes are *khao niao* (glutinous or sticky rice), often served in a knotted banana leaf; *sai ua* (Chiang Mai sausage); *khao soi* (a spicy, curried broth with vegetables and glass noodles); as well as many distinctive meat and fish curries. The formal northern meal is called *khan toke,* referring to the custom of sharing a variety of main courses (eaten with the hands) with guests seated around a *khan toke* (a low, lacquered table).

Near the Ping River

Expensive

Le Coq d'Or ★★ FRENCH In a romantic English country-house setting, Le Coq d'Or is second to none in Chiang Mai for excellent atmosphere, food, presentation, and service. Professional waiters serve from a list of imported beef, lamb, and fish prepared in French and Continental styles. Presentation is done on fine white linen and real china. Try the chateaubriand, rare, with a delicate gravy and béarnaise on the side. The poached Norwegian salmon is a fine light choice. For starters, try the foie gras or a salmon tar tar wrapped in smoked filet and served with toast, a sour-cream-and-horseradish sauce, and capers. A nice wine list complements the menu.

68/1 Ko Klang Rd. (5-min. drive south of the Holiday Inn, following the river). ✆ **05314-1555.** Reservations recommended for weekend dinners. Main courses 680B–3,800B ($19–$109/£12–£69). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–10pm.

Moderate

The Gallery ★ THAI Built in 1892 and one of the oldest original wooden structures in Chiang Mai, the Gallery is the most tranquil and romantic of the riverside restaurants on the eastern bank of the Ping River. This was the auspicious spot where, during her visit to Chiang Mai in 1996, Hillary Clinton chose to set sail her float at the Loi Kratong Festival. The menu offers a nice mix of northern Thai specialties and more traditional Thai dishes. Candlelight, soft Thai music, and a great view of the river and the city's twinkling lights beyond top off a lovely evening of dining. If you're in the mood for after-dinner jazz, stop by the attached Tha Chang Jazz Club, with live performances most nights.

25–29 Charoenrat Rd. (east side of river, north of Nara wat Bridge). ✆ **05324-8601-1.** Main courses 120B–470B ($3.40–$13/£2.20–£8.55). AE, MC, V. Daily noon–1am.

The Riverside ★★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Casual and cool is what the Riverside is all about. Something of a Chiang Mai institution, it has recently lost most of its river frontage, but has opened an attractive alternative across the road to accommodate its many fans. There's live music, from blues to soft rock, plus great Thai and Western food (including burgers) and a full bar. Even if you just stop by for a beer, it's a convivial place that always draws an eclectic mix of Thais, travelers, and expats. Riverside also operates a dining cruise at 8pm (board at 7:15pm) for just 70B ($2/£1.25) per person; drinks and dining are a la carte.

9–11 Charoenrat Rd. (east side of river, north of Narawat Bridge). ✆ **05324-3239.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 160B–365B ($4.55–$10/£2.90–£6.60). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–1am.

Around the Old City

Expensive

The House ★★ PACIFIC RIM/FUSION This cozy bistro is set in an old colonial-style edifice decorated in placid pale tones, with seating in rattan chairs around linen-draped tables. It's a good spot for an evening of fine dining, and the menu is a constantly evolving roster of regionally influenced classical dishes, grilled items, imported steaks, lamb, and seafood (when available fresh).

199 Moonmuang Rd. (just north of Tha Pae Gate on the inside edge of the city moat). ✆ **05341-9011.** Main courses 320B–1,050B ($9.15–$30/£5.80–£19). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm.

Le Grand Lanna ★★ THAI Chiang Mai's most opulent Thai restaurant is indeed grand. Part of the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi complex (p. 190), Le Grand Lanna enjoys an idyllic setting. Diners choose from the deluxe Lanna Thai pavilions, various open deck areas, pond-side courtyards among banyan trees, and theme rooms. Evening meals are all candlelight, outdoor torches, and the dulcet tones of traditional music, and there is usually a performance of traditional dance from 8 to 9pm. Try the whitefish with lemon-coleslaw marinade, one of the delicious and varied curries, or the *gaeng hang lan mop,* a dry, fiery red curry that will knock your socks off (best mollified by a sweet mango chutney). Follow up with great homemade ice cream in local litchi or taro flavors.

51/4 Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd., Moo 1 T. Tasala (4km/2½ miles east of the city; follow signs for the Dhara Devi and turn right/south down a small lane). ✆ **05388-8888.** Main courses 160B–870B ($4.55–$25/£2.90–£16). AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Moderate

Pulcinella Da Stefano ★ ITALIAN Da Stefano's is in a narrow lane off Tha Pae Road; it's a lively and popular place with an extensive catalog of northern Italian cuisine, including steaks, excellent pizzas, and pastas. Portions are big, the wine list is deep, and there are good daily set menus and specials. Meet lots of young backpackers splurging after long, rugged journeys in the north.

2/102 Chang Mai Kao Rd. (just to the east of Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05387-4189.** Main courses 120B–530B ($3.40–$15/£2.20–£9.60). AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–10:30pm.

Ruen Tamarind ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Part of Tamarind Village (see "Where to Stay," above), Ruen Tamarind offers a fine selection of northern Thai cuisine with a couple of international favorites thrown in for the less adventurous. A must-try is the *tort mun pla,* or fried fish cakes, a common dish with a delicious twist: The cakes are marinated with small chunks of banana and are served with peanut sauce. In the evenings, the restaurant's candlelit tables spread onto the hotel's lovely pool deck. Live jazz is performed every night.

At the Tamarind Village, 50/1 Rathcadamnoen Rd., Sriphom (a short walk toward the center of the Old City from Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05341-8896.** Main courses 160B–450B ($4.55–$13/£2.90–£8.20). MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Inexpensive

Huen Phen THAI Huen Phen, near Wat Phra Sing, is an authentic local choice. At lunchtime the basic eatery out front serves good *khao soi,* Chiang Mai's famed noodle stew, as well as *khanom jeen namneua,* a beef stew in a hearty broth with noodles. In the evenings, typical northern Thai dishes such as *gaeng hang lay* (pork curry with ginger) are served in the atmospheric house, which is set back from the road and is full of local crafts and furnishings.

112 Rachamankha Rd. ✆ **05381-4548.** Main courses 30B–80B (85¢–$2.30/55p–£1.45). No credit cards. Daily 8:30am–4pm and 5–10:30pm.

Mike's Original Burger ★★ AMERICAN This is the only cheeseburger (outside the U.S.) that can compare to even an average American burger (McDonald's does not count, by the way). Just a simple street-side counter, Mike's serves hot dogs as well as the aforementioned burgers; however, if you're a vegetarian, your only option is the condiments. It's the perfect stop before exploring the *wats* or after exploring a couple of bottles of Beer Singh.

Chaiyaphum Rd. (at corner of Changmoi Rd., just north of Tha Pae Gate). No phone. Main courses 110B–165B ($3.15–$4.70/£2–£3). No credit cards. Daily noon–3am.

Snacks & Cafes

Kalare Food & Shopping Center (Chang Klan Rd., opposite the Night Bazaar; ✆ **05327-2067**) is where you'll find a small food court next to the nightly Thai culture show, which starts around 8pm. **Ratana's Kitchen** (320–322 Tha Pae Rd.; ✆ **05387-4173**) is a popular place on the town's main street where the huge menu includes filling sandwiches, tasty curries, and refreshing fruit shakes. Right across from Tha Pae Gate, the **Art Cafe** (291 Tha Pae Rd.; ✆ **05320-6365**) serves everything from pizza to enchiladas and is a good spot for people-watching.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The Wats

Chiang Mai has more than 120 temples, the largest concentration outside of Bangkok. In 1 very full day, you can hit all the highlights in Old Chiang Mai by tuk-tuk or even by foot, if you keep up a good pace.

Wat Chedi Luang ★★★ Because this temple is in the heart of the Old City, most visitors begin their sightseeing here, where there are two *wats* of interest. This complex, which briefly housed the Emerald Buddha now at Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaeo, dates from 1411 when the original *chedi* (mound) was built by King Saen Muang Ma. The already-massive edifice was expanded to 84m (276 ft.) in height in the mid-1400s, only to be ruined by a severe earthquake in 1545, just 11 years before Chiang Mai fell to the Burmese. A recent restoration gives an idea of its former grandeur, with elephant statues round its base and Buddha images in niches, though it still lacks a spire. Just inside the entrance to the temple compound, a towering tree stands over a small building that houses Chiang Mai's City Pillar.

Wat Pan Tao, right next door, has a lovely teak *wihaan* (assembly hall), with beautiful glass mosaics in the form of a peacock over the main door. After leaving the temple, walk around to the monks' quarters on the side, taking in the traditional teak northern architecture and delightful landscaping.

Prapokklao Rd., south of Ratchadamnoen Rd. Suggested donation 20B (55¢/35p).

Wat Chet Yot (Seven Spires) ★★ Also called Wat Maha Photharam, Wat Chet Yot is one of the city's most elegant sites. The *chedi* was built during the reign of King Tilokkarat in the late 15th century (his remains are in one of the smaller *chedis*), and in 1477, the World Sangkayana convened here to revise the doctrines of the Buddha. The unusual design of the main rectangular *chedi* with seven peaks was copied from the Maha Bodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India, where the Buddha first achieved enlightenment. The temple also has architectural elements of Burmese, Chinese Yuan, and Ming influence.

The extraordinary proportions; the angelic, levitating *devata* (Buddhist spirits) figures carved into the base of the *chedi;* and the juxtaposition of the other buildings make Wat Chet Yot a masterpiece.

On the superhighway near the Chiang Mai National Museum (north of the intersection of Nimmanhaemin and Huai Kaeo roads, about 1km/½ mile on the left). Suggested donation 20B (55¢/35p).

Wat Chiang Man Thought to be Chiang Mai's oldest *wat,* it was built during the 13th century by King Mengrai, the founder of Chiang Mai, on the spot where he first camped. Like many of the *wats* in Chiang Mai, this complex reflects varied architectural styles. Some of the structures are pure Lanna, while others show influences from as far away as Sri Lanka; notice the typical row of elephant supports at the base of the gold-capped *chedi.* Wat Chiang Man is most famous for its two Buddhas: **Phra Saetang Khamani** (a miniature crystal image also known as the **White Emerald Buddha**) and the marble **Phra Sri-la Buddha.** Unfortunately, the *wihaan* that safeguards these religious sculptures is almost always closed.

Ratchaphakkinai Rd., in the Old City, near the north moat.

Wat Phra Singh ★★★ This compound was built during the zenith of Chiang Mai's power and is one of the more venerated temples in the city. It's still the site of many important religious ceremonies, particularly during the Songkran Festival. More than 700 monks study here, and you will probably find them especially friendly and curious. King Phayu, of Mengrai lineage, built the *chedi* in 1345, principally to house the cremated remains of King Kamfu, his father. As you enter the grounds, head to the right toward the 14th-century scripture library, a superb example of Lanna religious architecture. The sculptural devata figures, in both dancing and meditative poses, are thought to have been made during King Muang Kaeo's reign in the early 16th century. They decorate a stone base designed to keep the fragile *sa* (mulberry bark) manuscripts elevated from flooding and vermin.

On the other side of the temple complex is the 200-year-old Lai Kham (Gilded Hall) Wihaan, housing the venerated image of the **Phra Singh,** brought to the site by King Muang Ma in 1400. The original Buddha's head was stolen in 1922, but the reproduction in its place doesn't diminish the homage paid to this figure during Songkran. Inside are frescoes illustrating the stories of Sang Thong (the Golden Prince of the Conch Shell) and Suwannahong. These images convey a great deal about the religious, civil, and military life of 19th-century Chiang Mai during King Mahotraprathet's reign.

Samlarn and Ratchadamnoen roads. Suggested donation 20B (55¢/35p).

Wat Suan Dok This complex is special less for its architecture (the buildings, though monumental, are undistinguished) than for its contemplative spirit and pleasant surroundings. The temple was built amid the pleasure gardens of the 14th-century Lanna Thai monarch, King Ku Na. Wat Suan Dok houses quite a few monks who study at the northern campus of the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University and are keen to practice their English with visitors. Among the main attractions in the complex are the *bot,* with a very impressive **Chiang Saen Buddha** (one of the largest bronzes in the north), dating from 1504, and some garish murals. Behind the *wihaan* are numerous *chedis* containing the ashes of Chiang Mai's royal family, which look particularly impressive when seen in silhouette against the setting sun. There is also an informal "monk chat," where monks and lay visitors can share views, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 5 to 7pm.

Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center 5
Chiang Mai National Museum 2
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Wat Chet Yot (Seven Spires) 1
Wat Chiang Man 4
Wat Chiang Yuen 3
Wat Phan Tao 7
Wat Phra Singh 8
Wat Suan Dok 9

 Suthep Rd. (from the Old City, take the Suan Dok Gate and continue 1.6km/1 mile west). Suggested donation 20B (55¢/35p).

Museums

Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center In a shuttered colonial building adjacent to the Three Kings Monument in the heart of the Old City, this museum houses a permanent exhibit that walks visitors through a tour of prehistory to the present. Another section houses short-term local exhibits of all types.

Prapokklao Rd. ✆ **05321-7793.** Admission 90B ($2.55/£1.60). Tues–Sun 8:30am–5pm.

Chiang Mai National Museum While its collection of historic treasures is not nearly as extensive as that of Bangkok's National Museum, this quick stop does provide something of an overview of the region, the city, and its history. The Lanna Kingdom, Tai people, and hill tribes are highlighted in simple displays with English explanations.

Just off the superhighway northwest of the Old City near Wat Chet Yot. ✆ **05322-1308.** Admission 30B (85¢/55p). Wed–Sun 9am–4pm.

Cultural Pursuits

THAI COOKING If you love Thai food and want to learn how to make it, look into a class at the **Chiang Mai Cookery School** ★, the oldest establishment of its kind in Chiang Mai. It has five 1-day courses, each designed to teach Thai cooking basics but with a different menu—of up to seven dishes—so you can attend as many days as you want and still gain quite a bit of skill. You'll have hands-on training and a lot of fun. Classes start at 10am and last until 4pm; they cost 990B ($28/£18) for the day. Contact the main office at 47/2 Moonmuang Rd., opposite the Tha Pae Gate (✆ **05320-6388;** fax 05320-6387; www.thaicookeryschool.com).

THAI MASSAGE Northern-style Thai massage is something closer to yoga, in which your muscles are stretched and elongated to enhance flexibility and relaxation. There are a number of schools in Chiang Mai. Try the **International Training Massage (ITM),** where a 5-day course is 3,500B ($100/£64). Contact the school at 17/7 Morakot Rd., Hah Yaek Santitham (✆ **05321-8632;** fax 05322-4197; www.itmthaimassage.com).

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

ELEPHANT RIDING One of Thailand's greatest treasures, the domesticated Asian elephant has worked alongside men since the early history of Siam, and these gentle giants are an important symbol of the kingdom. There are a total of 14 elephant camps near Chiang Mai, some with animals in rather dire condition. Far above the rest is the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center,** on the road to Lampang (see "Side Trips from Chiang Mai," below), where visitors can watch shows and also work with the animals. Of the others, try **Maetaman Elephant Camp** (535 Moo 1, Maerim, Chiang Mai; ✆ **05329-7060;** www.maetamanelephantcamp.com). Day tours include a few hours of hill trekking in a howdah on elephant-back.

GOLF Golf is a hugely popular activity in Chiang Mai, especially among the many Western retirees and vacationing Thais. All courses below are open to the public and offer equipment rental. Call ahead to reserve a tee time.

- **Summit Green Valley Country Club,** 186 Moo 1, Chotana Rd., in Mae Rim, 20 minutes north of town on Route 107 (✆ **05329-8220;** fax 05329-7426; www.summitgreenvalleycountryclub.com), is in excellent condition with flat greens and fairways that

slope toward the Ping River (greens fees: 1,800B/$51/£33 weekdays, 2,400B/$69/£44 weekends).

- **Chiang Mai Highlands Golf & Spa Resort,** 167 Moo 2, Tambol On-Nuar (✆ **05326-1354;** fax 05326-1363; www.chiangmaihighlands.com), is a hillside course about 20 minutes east of town off Hwy. 1317 (greens fees: 1,550B/$44/£28 weekdays, 1,950B/$56/£35 weekends).
- **Chiang Mai–Lamphun Country Club,** Baan Thi Road, 10km (6 1/4 miles) east of Sankamphaeng (✆ **05388-0880;** fax 05388-0888), in a valley to the east, is a fine 18-hole course (greens fees: 1,600B/$46/£29 weekdays, 2,000B/$57/£36 weekends).

TREKKING For jungle trekking, a number of outfitters arrange trips from Chiang Mai. **Contact Travel** (420/3 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai; ✆ **05327-7178;** fax 05327-9505; www.activethailand.com) is in a category all its own—it can combine treks and village stays with multisport adventures by jeep, bicycle, and kayak.

Small operators that cater to the backpacker market offer tours and treks for as little as 600B ($17/£11) per day. This can mean you'll be in a large group, with care and feeding at a lower standard, but that's budget trekking for you. **Top North Tours** (41 Moonmuang Rd., Chiang Mai; ✆ **05320-8788**) and **Queen Bee Travel Service** (5 Moonmuang Rd., Chiang Mai; ✆ **05327-5525**) are both good.

THE SPA SCENE

Most hotels offer massage and beauty treatments, and there are lots of street-side massage places of varying quality and reputation. The **Four Seasons Resort** (Mae Rim–Samoeng Old Rd.; ✆ **05329-8181**) has some of the finest spa facilities in Thailand and, though it comes with a high price tag, the quality and service are unbeatable. **Oasis Spa** (✆ **05392-0111;** www.chiangmaioasis.com), with two convenient locations, is more affordable, has a variety of treatments, and comes highly recommended. **Let's Relax,** in Chiang Mai Pavilion (145/28–30 Chang Klan Rd., on the second floor above McDonald's; ✆ **05381-8498**), has good rates and makes for a relaxing break from shopping.

SHOPPING

If you plan to shop in Thailand, save your money for Chiang Mai. Quality craft pieces and handmade traditional items still sell for very little, and large outlets for fine antiques and high-end goods abound in and around the city. Many shoppers pick up an affordable new piece of luggage to tote their finds home. If you find that huge standing Buddha or oversize Thai divan you've been searching for, don't worry: All stores can arrange shipping.

The **Night Bazaar** ★★, on Chang Klan Road between the Old Town and the river, is the city's premier attraction. Shopping starts around 6pm each night and slows down at about 11pm. The actual Night Bazaar is a modern, antiseptic, three-story building, but the indoor and outdoor market extends south to Sridonchai Road and far beyond. There are thousands of pirated audiotapes and videodiscs, acres of burnished brown "bone" objects, masks, woodcarvings, opium pipes, opium weights—you name it.

If you're in town on a Sunday, head for Ratchadamnoen Road in the Old City, which is closed to traffic from around 4 to 11pm for the **Walking Street.** Thousands of stalls set up selling locally made crafts, while food vendors and musicians add to the atmosphere.

AROUND THE OLD CITY Small shops and boutiques line the areas around the Night Bazaar and Old City. Sleek designs steal the show at **Living Space** (276–278 Tha Pae Rd.; ✆ **05387-4156**), with its collection of home furnishings, celadon, and lacquerware.

Nova Collection (201 Tha Pae Rd.; ✆ **05327-3058**) carries a line of decorative jewelry in contemporary styles with Asian influences and also has 1- to 5-day courses in jewelry making. **Princess Jewelry** (147/8 Chang Klan Rd.; ✆ **05327-3648**) offers customized and ready-made jewelry and personalized service. For silk, try **City Silk** (336 Tha Pae Rd., 1 block east of the gate; ✆ **05323-4388**).

WEST SIDE Across from the Amari Rincome Hotel, **Nantawan Arcade** (95 Nimmanhaemin Rd.) has many notable antiques, crafts, and curio shops that make for fun browsing. **Gong Dee Gallery** (Nimmanhaemin Rd. Soi 1; ✆ **05322-5032**) has a fine collection of gifts and original artwork. Try **Ginger** (6/21 Nimmanhaemin Rd.; ✆ **05321-5635**) for fine designer clothing and jewelry.

SANKAMPHAENG ROAD Shopaholics will be thrilled by the many outlets along the Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Road (Rte. 1006). Rent your own wheels or hop on the white *songtao* that follow this busy road due east of town. After several miles, you'll reach the many shops, showrooms, and factories extending along a 9km (5½-mile) strip. These feature anything from lacquerware to ready-made clothes, silver to celadon pottery.

For pottery, try **Baan Celadon** (7 Moo 3, Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd.; ✆ **05333-8288**) and **Siam Celadon** (38 Moo 10, Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd.; ✆ **05324-33-1526**). For silver pieces, **Louis Silverware** (99/1 Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd.; ✆ **05333-8494**) has traditional silversmiths on the premises so you can see the various stages of the jewelry-making process. The **Thai Silk Village** (120/27 Moo 3, Chiang Mai–Sankamphaeng Rd.; ✆ **05333-8357**) takes you from silkworm to loom to scarf.

CHIANG MAI AFTER DARK

The Night Bazaar area is the center of nighttime activity—there are lots of small bars, clubs, and go-go joints here. If you get tired and hungry along the way, you'll want to stop at **Kalare Food & Shopping Center** (Chang Klan Rd., opposite the Night Bazaar; ✆ **05327-2067**), which has free cultural dance shows nightly at around 8pm.

For a more studied cultural performance, the **Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center,** 185/3 Wulai Rd. (✆ **05327-4093;** www.oldchiangmai.com), stages a good show at 7pm every night for 270B ($7.70/£4.90), which includes dinner. Enjoy a *khan toke* meal accompanied by live music and dance. Yup, it's touristy, but a rollicking good time.

The following are just a few bars and clubs among the many to choose from. **Good View** (13 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-1866**) and the **Riverside** (9/11 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-3239**) are both popular riverfront restaurants that feature live music. Blues and reggae fans should head straight for **Le Brasserie** (37 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-1665**), where resident guitarist Took gets everyone in the groove.

During the cool season (Nov–Feb), the **Imperial Mae Ping Beer Garden,** 153 Sridonchai Rd.; ✆ **5328-3900**) is a pleasant spot to enjoy a pitcher of beer. The **Bubble Disco,** at Pornping Tower Hotel (46 Charoen Prathet Rd.; ✆ **05327-0099**), attracts a mixed crowd of Thais and foreigners, while **Spicy** (Chaiyaphum Rd., near Tha Pae Gate; no phone) is the place to go when everywhere else is closed (around 2am).

Outside of town in Doi Suthep–Pui National Park, the controversial **Chiang Mai Night Safari** (✆ **05399-9000;** www.chiangmainightsafari.com) offers a chance to ride around in open-air trams and perhaps glimpse some of the 60 species of animals on show in the poorly lit pens, including giraffes, Asian elephants, impalas, and maybe even a cheetah. Reports of animal deaths due to mishandling and the ill-conceived plan to serve rare species at the park's restaurant have caused public outcries and protests. The park is

The Mae Hong Son Loop

Seasoned travelers, given the option, never backtrack, and the "loop" through the rugged hills north and west of Chiang Mai is gaining popularity for that very reason. Connecting the towns of Pai and Mae Hong Son, the circuit continues to out-of-the-way Mae Sariang before returning to Chiang Mai. For all but the adventurous, going by tour or by hired car with a driver is recommended, though a self-drive means freedom to take side trips and explore at one's own pace. The road is serpentine and precipitous, and calls for good driving skills (watch for anything from smoke-belching buses to buffalo to landslides). Give yourself 4 days to do it, staying at least a night in each town.

Your first stop is **Pai,** 135km (84 miles) northwest of Chiang Mai. It's very popular with backpackers and is characterized by scenic views and a laid-back vibe. Overnight rafting trips on the Pai River with **Thai Adventure Rafting** (16 Moo 4, Rangsiyanon Rd.; ✆ **05369-9111;** www.thairafting.com) are popular July through January.

Guesthouses abound in Pai. Try **Rim Pai Cottages,** in the town center (✆ **05369-9133;** www.rimpaicottage.com). One of the best high-end choices is **Belle Villa Resort** (113 Moo 6, Tumol Viengtai; ✆ **05369-8226-7;** www.bellevillaresort.com), just outside of town, with cozy stilted cottages starting from 2,950B ($84/£54).

Between Pai and Mae Hong Son, you'll find the **Lod,** or **Spirit Cave,** some 8km (5 miles) north of the highway. This large, awe-inspiring cave is filled with colorful stalagmites and stalactites; the small caverns will keep you exploring for hours. Hire a guide with a lantern at the entrance; you'll pay 150B ($4.30/£2.70), plus 300B ($8.60/£5.45) for ferry crossings.

Mae Hong Son, the next stop on the loop, sits on the very edge of Myanmar and is the largest town amid the scenic woodlands, waterways, and unique hill-tribe villages of the area. The town is famed for cool weather, an eerie morning mist, and bursts of fall foliage. It's a good base for trekking. Contact **Rose Garden Tours** (86/4 Khunlumprapas Rd.; ✆/fax **05361-1681;** www.rosegarden-tours.com), which arranges treks and visits to nearby **Padaung Villages,** peopled by the famed **"long-necked Karen."**

The best place to stay in town is the luxury **Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son Hotel** (149 Moo 8, Tambol Pang Moo; ✆ **05368-4444;** www.imperialhotels.com/taramaehongson), with rooms from 2,550B ($73/£46). A good in-town budget choice is **Bai Yoke Chalet** (90 Khunlumprapas, Chong Kham; ✆ **05361-1536**), where you'll pay 1,000B ($28/£18) and up.

Mae Sariang is just a cozy river town and the best halfway stopover on the long southern link between Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai. Driving in the area, along Route 108, takes you past pastoral villages, scenic rolling hills, and a few enticing side trips to small local temples and waterfalls. Mae Sariang offers only basic accommodations; try **Riverhouse Hotel** (77 Langpanich Rd.; ✆ **05362-1201**).

 open Monday through Friday from 1 to 10:30pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 10:30pm. Admission is 500B ($14/£9) for adults and 300B ($8.55/£5.45) for children.

SIDE TRIPS FROM CHIANG MAI

If you have time for only one day trip, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai's famed mountain and temple, is the best choice.

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep ★★★

The jewel of Chiang Mai, Wat Phra That glistens in the sun on the slopes of Doi Suthep mountain. At 1,000m (3,280 ft.), the temple occupies an extraordinary site with a cool refreshing climate, expansive views over the city (weather permitting), and the mountain's idyllic forests, waterfalls, and flowers.

In the 14th century, during the installation of a relic of the Buddha in Wat Suan Dok (in the Old City), the holy object split in two, with one part equaling the original size. A new *wat* was needed to honor the miracle. King Ku Na placed the new relic on a sacred white elephant and let it wander freely through the hills. The elephant climbed to the top of Doi Suthep, trumpeted three times, made three counterclockwise circles, and knelt down, thus choosing the site for Wat Phra That.

The site is highly revered, and Thai visitors come to make an offering—usually flowers, candles, incense, and small squares of gold leaf that are applied to a favored Buddha or to the exterior of a *chedi*—and to be blessed.

The site is open from 6am to 8pm, and the entrance fee is 30B (85¢/55p), or 50B ($1.40/90p) including tram fare (which avoids the climb up 306 steps). To get here, take a *songtao* (50B/$1.40/90p) from Huay Kaeo Road in front of Chiang Mai University. Dress respectfully, meaning no shorts or sleeveless tops. In the cool season, take a sweater or jacket, as it gets cold up there.

Lampang ★

The sprawling town of Lampang (originally called Khelang Nakhon) was once famous for its exclusive reliance on the horse and carriage for transportation long after the car was introduced. In fact, old-style horse buggies can still be rented near the center of town next to the City Hall. Sprawling Lampang has some of the finest Burmese temples in Thailand, and short tours by horse and carriage are popular.

About 37km (23 miles) east of town, don't miss the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** (✆ **05424-7875;** www.thailandelephant.org). The center is less touristy than other camps, though there are daily shows at 10am, 11am, and 1:30pm (adults 70B/$2/£1.30; children 30B/85¢/55p), and you can watch them bathing at 9:45am and 1:15pm. Visitors can take a ride on an elephant, and there are also homestay programs for anyone who wants to learn how to be an elephant mahout, though these must be booked well in advance. Check their website for more information.

Doi Inthanon National Park

Thailand's tallest mountain, **Doi Inthanon**—at 2,563m (8,406 ft.)—is 106km (66 miles) south of Chiang Mai. It crowns a 482-sq.-km (186-sq.-mile) national park filled with impressive waterfalls and wild orchids. There is a road to the summit, and along the way are the 30m-high (98-ft.) **Mae Klang Falls,** a popular picnic spot with food stands. Admission is 400B ($11/£7.30).

25 CHIANG RAI

180km (112 miles) NE of Chiang Mai, 780km (484 miles) NE of Bangkok

Chiang Rai is Thailand's northernmost province. The Mekong River makes its borders with Laos to the east and Myanmar (Burma) to the west. The smaller yet scenic Mae Kok River, which supports many hill-tribe villages along its banks, flows right through the provincial capital of the same name.

Chiang Rai lies some 565m (1,853 ft.) above sea level in a wide fertile valley, and its cool, refreshing climate, tree-lined riverbanks, and popular Night Market lure travelers weary of traffic congestion and pollution in Chiang Mai. Although Chiang Rai has some passable hotels and restaurants and a few small attractions, most just use this as a base for trips to Chiang Saen and the Golden Triangle.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **05392-0920** in Chiang Mai) has three daily flights from Bangkok to Chiang Rai (trip time: 80 min.). **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999**) has two daily flights. The **Chiang Rai International Airport** (✆ **05379-3048**) is 10km (6 1/4 miles) north of town. Taxis to town are 200B ($5.70/£3.60).

BY BUS Three air-conditioned, VIP 24-seat buses leave daily from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**) to Chiang Rai (trip time: 11 hr.; 900B/$26/£16). Buses leave from Chiang Mai's **Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**) roughly every hour between 6am and 5:30pm (trip time: 3 1/2 hr.; 106B/$3/£1.90 non-A/C; 191B/$5.45/£3.50 A/C; 295B/$8.40/£5.35 VIP). Chiang Rai's **Khon Song Bus Terminal** (✆ **05371-1224**) is near the night market in the center of town. Tuk-tuks and *samlor* (motorized pedicabs) connect to hotels for 30B to 60B (85¢–$1.70/55p–£1.10).

BY CAR The fast, not particularly scenic, route from Bangkok is Hwy. 1 north, direct to Chiang Rai. A slower, but more scenic approach, on blacktop mountain roads is Route 107 north from Chiang Mai to Fang, then Route 109 east to Hwy. 1.

GETTING AROUND

Chiang Rai is a small city, with most services grouped around the main north-south street, Phaholyothin Road. The Mae Kok River forms the north edge of town. The bus station is near the central Night Market just off Phaholyothin Road. The town is compact enough to explore on foot; however, there are ***samlor*** and **tuk-tuks,** which charge 30B to 60B (85¢–$1.70/55p–£1.10) in town.

BY MOTORCYCLE A good choice to get out of town. **Soon Motorcycle,** 197/2 Trairat Rd. (✆ **05371-4068**) charges 150B ($4.30/£2.70) per day for a 100cc motorbike.

BY CAR **Budget** has a branch at the Golden Triangle Inn (see "Where to Stay & Dine," below; 590 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05374-0442**), with standard rates beginning at 950B ($27/£17) for a Honda Jazz.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** (✆ **05374-4674**) is at 448/16 Singhakai Rd., near Wat Phra Singh on the north side of town. Good free maps and info are available anywhere.

FAST FACTS: CHIANG RAI

To exchange currency, look for the several **banks** on Phaholyothin Road in the center of town, open daily from 8:30am to 10pm. The **Overbrook Hospital** (✆ **05371-1366**) is on the north side of town at Singhakai and Trairat roads, west of the TAT. There are a few **Internet cafes** along the main drag, Phaholyothin Road, with average service going for 30B (85¢/55p) per hour. The **tourist police** (✆ **05374-0249**) is on Phaholyothin Road, near the town center. The **post office** is 2 blocks north of the clock tower on Uttarakit Road.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

With the exception of the expensive resort across the river, most Chiang Rai hotels are within walking distance of the sights and shopping. As for dining options, after 7pm the **Night Market** is the best for budget eats, but beyond that there are a few good restaurants to choose from.

Look for a branch of Bangkok's **Cabbages & Condoms** (620/25 Thanalai Rd.; ✆ **05371-9167**), a good Thai restaurant that promotes its humanitarian work. The **Golden Triangle Cafe** ★, at the Golden Triangle Inn (see below), serves great regional treats from a menu that is a short course in Thai cuisine. **BaanChivitMai Bakery** (✆ **05371-2357**), conveniently located across from the bus station, offers an all-day breakfast menu, breads and pastries, and Internet service.

Tip: Be sure to sample the town's delicacies, such as the huge *ching kong* catfish, caught in April and May; litchis, which ripen in June and July; and the sweet *nanglai* pineapple wine.

Expensive

Dusit Island Resort, Chiang Rai ★★ Chiang Rai's best-known resort hotel occupies a large delta island in the Mae Kok River and offers comfort at the expense of atmosphere. The lobby is grand, with panoramic views of the water. Rooms are luxuriously appointed with pastel cottons and teak trim. The resort has manicured grounds, a pool, and numerous facilities that make the place quite self-contained. Tenth-floor dining at the Peak offers sweeping views, while the Chinatown restaurant serves good Cantonese. Stop by the Music Room bar in the evening.

1129 Kraisorasit Rd., Amphur Muang, Chiang Rai 57000 (over bridge at northwest corner of town). ✆ **05360-7999.** Fax 05371-5801. www.dusit.com. 271 units. 4,000B–5,900B ($114–$143/£73–£91) superior/deluxe double; from 8,200B ($234/£149) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge and pub; outdoor pool; floodlit tennis courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; game room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Wiang Inn Hotel ★ The best of the downtown choices, its rooms are clean and spacious with all of the de rigueur Lanna decorations (in case you'd forgotten where you were). It's just a short stroll to the bus station and Night Market, making it a popular stop for tour groups and often full—book ahead.

893 Phaholyothin Rd., Chiang Rai 57000 (just south of the bus station). ✆ **05371-1533.** Fax 05371-1877. www.wianginn.com. 260 units. 2,800B–3,200B ($80–$91/£51–£58) double; from 6,000B ($171/£109) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; karaoke bar and lobby lounge; outdoor pool; tour desk; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Golden Triangle Inn ★★ The Golden Triangle is set in its own quiet little garden patch. Large rooms have terra-cotta floors and traditional-style furniture and decor. The

staff is helpful, the Thai restaurant is excellent, and the in-house travel agency, Golden Triangle Tours, is the best choice in town for arranging travel in the area.

590 Phaholyothin Rd., Amphur Muang, Chiang Rai 57000 (2 blocks north of bus station). ✆ **05371-3918.** Fax 05371-3963. www.goldenchiangrai.com. 39 units. 900B ($26/£16) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; car rental; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, no phone.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

There are a number of fine *wats* in town: **Wat Phra Kaeo,** on Trairat Road in the northwest quadrant, is the best known of the northern *wats* because it once housed the Emerald Buddha now at Bangkok's royal Wat Phra Kaeo. **Wat Phra Sing,** a restored 15th-century temple, is 2 blocks east of Wat Phra Kaeo. The Burmese-style **Wat Doi Tong** (Phra That Chomtong) sits atop a hill above the northwest side of town, up a steep staircase off Kaisornrasit Road, and offers an overview of Chiang Rai and a panorama of the Mae Kok Valley. It's said that King Mengrai himself chose the site for his new Lanna capital from this very hill.

The **Mae Kok River** is one of the most scenic attractions in the area. You can hire a longtail boat for day trips to outlying villages. Most of the **hill-tribe villages** within close range of Chiang Rai have long ago been set up for routine visits by group tours (not recommended), but there are a few good outfitters. The best operation is **Golden Triangle Tours,** at the Golden Triangle Inn, 590 Phaholyothin Rd. (✆ **05371-3918;** www.goldenchiangrai.com). It offers everything from 1-day hill-tribe treks to weeklong adventures.

26 CHIANG SAEN ★ & THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

239km (148 miles) NE of Chiang Mai, 935km (580 miles) NE of Bangkok

The small village of **Chiang Saen** has a sleepy, rural charm, as if the waters of the Mekong carried a palpable calm from nearby Myanmar (Burma) and Laos. Chiang Saen was abandoned for the new Lanna Thai capitals of Chiang Rai and then Chiang Mai, in the 13th century, and today the decaying regal *wats,* crumbling fort walls, and overgrown moat contribute greatly to its appeal. After visiting the museum and local sights, most travelers head west along the Mekong to the **Golden Triangle,** the north's prime attraction. It is actually less mysterious than its reputation and more like a row of souvenir stalls leading to a giant riverside golden Buddha statue, but if you stand at the crook of the river, you can see Laos on the right and Myanmar (Burma) on the left.

GETTING THERE

BY BUS Buses from Chiang Rai's **Kohn Song Bus Terminal** (✆ **05371-1224**) leave every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm (trip time: 1 ½ hr.; 38B/$1.10/70p). The bus drops you on Chiang Saen's main street; the museum and temples are within walking distance.

BY CAR Take Route 110 north from Chiang Rai to Mae Chan, then Route 1016 northeast to Chiang Saen.

GETTING AROUND

Route 1016 is the village's main street, also called Phaholyothin Road, which terminates at the Mekong River. Along the river road there are a few guesthouses, eateries, and souvenir, clothing, and food stalls.

BY BICYCLE/MOTORCYCLE It's a great 45-minute bike ride from Chiang Saen to the prime nearby attraction, the Golden Triangle. The roads are well paved and pretty flat. You'll see a few rental outlets along the river that charge 50B ($1.40/90p) per day.

BY SAMLOR Motorized pedicabs hover by the bus stop in town to take you to the Golden Triangle for 60B ($1.70/£1.10) one-way.

BY SONGTAO These pickup-truck taxis can be found on the main street across from the market; rides to the Golden Triangle cost only 20B (55¢/35p).

BY LONGTAIL BOAT Longtail-boat captains wait down by the river and offer Golden Triangle tours to visitors. One popular option is a trip to the Golden Triangle with a short stop at a Lao village on the way, costing 800B ($23/£15) for 2 hours. The village is just a couple of market stalls, but you can find interesting cheap Chinese goods, Lao silks, or the "I bought this in Laos" souvenir. Others enjoy the half-hour cruise upriver, take a walk around the village of Sop Ruak after they've seen the Golden Triangle, and then continue on by bus.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The nearest **TAT** office is in Chiang Rai. You can pick up a useful map at the Chiang Saen National Museum (see below).

FAST FACTS: CHIANG SAEN

There's a **Siam Commercial Bank** in the center of the main street, Phaholyothin Road (Rte. 1016), close to the bus stop and **post office.** You'll also see currency-exchange booths at the Golden Triangle.

WHERE TO STAY

Very Expensive

For a different experience, consider a stay at the **Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle** (✆ **05391-0200;** www.fourseasons.com/goldentriangle), a superluxe, superexclusive resort. Getting to the camp requires a Kurtzian ride up the Mekong; once there, you will be pampered and wined and dined between *mahout* (elephant riding) classes.

Anantara Resort Golden Triangle ★★ The Anantara is a triumph of upscale local design. Every detail will remind you that you're in the scenic hill-tribe region: The resort features fine local weavings, carved teak panels, and expansive views of the juncture of the Ruak and Mekong rivers. The balconied guest rooms have splendid views and are so spacious and private, you'll feel like you're in your own bungalow. Tiled foyers lead to large bathrooms; the bedrooms are furnished in teak and traditional fabrics.

229 Moo 1, Chiang Saen 57150 (above river, 12km/7½ miles northwest of Chiang Saen). ✆ **05378-4084.** Fax 05378-4090. www.anantara.com. 77 units. 9,500B ($271/£173) double; 20,500B ($586/£373) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge and bar; outdoor pool; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; fitness center; Anantara Spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; elephant camp; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; limo service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, tea- and coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate/Inexpensive

The next step down from the luxurious Anantara Resort is the **Imperial Golden Triangle Resort** (222 Golden Triangle, Sop Ruak; ✆ **05378-4001;** www.imperialhotels.com), about 11km (7 miles) northwest of Chiang Saen. It's a clean but uninspired hotel, with rooms starting at 2,600B ($74/£47). There are great views of the river from the top floor.

Tips Onward to Laos

Some visitors make Chiang Rai or Chiang Saen their last port of call in Thailand before heading overland to rugged but inviting Laos. It is possible to travel downriver 70km (43 miles) to Chiang Khong, a small border town from which you can catch a boat into the "Land of a Thousand Elephants," Laos. Buses and local *songtao* make the connection to Chiang Khong from either Chiang Rai or Chiang Saen. For more information, see chapter 5, "Laos."

In tiny Chiang Saen, the **Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel** (714 Moo 3 Tambol Viang; ✆ **05365-0826**) has clean, attractive air-conditioned rooms from 1,200B ($34/£22). It's a 5-minute *samlor* ride from the bus stop.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Allow a half-day to see all of Chiang Saen's historic sights before exploring the Golden Triangle. The **Chiang Saen National Museum** (702 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05377-7102;** closed Mon–Tues) is a good first stop, with an overview of artifacts from 15th- to 17th-century Lanna Thai. Admission is 30B (85¢/55p).

The main temples of Chiang Saen are all within walking distance, though less-known sites are scattered around a wide area. **Wat Pa Sak** is the best preserved; the oldest is **Wat Phra Chedi Luang.** All are fine examples of Lanna temples.

The infamous **Golden Triangle,** 12km (7½ miles) northwest of Chiang Saen, is the point where Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos meet at the confluence of the broad, slow, and silted Mekong and Mae Ruak rivers. Once a no man's land of the international drug trade, the area is a unique vantage point for life in the north.

The **Hall of Opium** ★★ (✆ **05365-2151;** www.goldentrianglepark.org), located 10km (6¼ miles) northwest of Chiang Saen, is a sprawling museum overlooking the Mekong. A visit here provides a walk through the curious cultivation of poppies and the history of the opium trade. There is also information about the Thai war on drugs. Open daily 10am to 3:30pm; admission 300B ($8.60/£5.45).

5

Laos

by Sherisse Pham

Laos is a forgotten land. Most conversations about traveling to Southeast Asia focus on exploring Bangkok, finding the perfectly deserted white-sand beach, or visiting the temples at Angkor Wat. Talk rarely drifts to Laos. Many people may not know it's a viable travel option, much less what there is to see and do here. Part of this ignorance is a result of the shroud of Laos's communist government, which became politically and economically isolated after taking power in 1975. An air of mystery then drifted over the country.

In recent years, more light has shined on Laos, and the world is slowly discovering what the country and its people have to offer. Following in the footsteps of its more prosperous neighbors, Laos is making a concerted effort to build its fledgling tourism industry. One of the poorest countries in the world, Laos's designation by the United Nations as a "least-developed country" ensures an influx of money from both foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) alike.

Although some of this aid money goes to sustain the donor (case in point: the ubiquitous shiny white Range Rovers seen throughout the country), much of it's spent on developing the country's infrastructure. While improving, the roads are still primitive by Western standards—which means getting from point A to point B is, more often than not, an adventure. But for the stout of heart (and iron of stomach), these adventures are part of Laos's allure—they'll take you to places that are well worth some minor discomfort.

Vientiane, a perennial candidate for the "sleepiest capital in the world" crown, may be shocking to some. But a few days spent wandering the streets and watching the sun set over the Mekong makes a good introduction to "Lao time." A couple of hours north of Vientiane, you'll find **Vang Vieng**, a backpacker town set on the Nam Song River. Surrounded by gorgeous karst peaks, Vang Vieng is a great base for kayaking, trekking, and caving. Farther north lies **Luang Prabang**, ancient capital and UNESCO World Heritage Site. With its almost three dozen temples, French colonial architecture, and rich history, Luang Prabang is a magical town and not to be missed. In the far north, the **Nam Ha Biodiversity Conservation Area**, in Luang Namtha, offers off-the-beaten-path adventures. The pre-Angkorian temple **Wat Phou** sits in the southern province of Champasak. Finally, remnants of an even older civilization are in evidence at the mysterious **Plain of Jars**, in the heart of Xieng Khouang province.

Sixty percent of Lao people are practicing Buddhists, and that fact colors every facet of life. Temples and stupas dominate the architecture of even the smallest village, and you're sure to spot groups of monks in colorful robes on their early morning *pintabat*, or alms rounds, especially in Luang Prabang. Buddhist acceptance and compassion play an important part in Lao culture; arguments are the exception, and the *sangha*, or monastic community, fosters a strict moral code. Even the shortest visit to Laos offers unique insight into Buddhist culture.

With recent infrastructure development and rising tourism, many fear for the natural and cultural resources of this peaceful landlocked nation. If Laos follows neighboring Thailand's model, as it does in many areas, its forests and waterways may be further exploited and, by packaging tourism for mass consumption, ethnic villages may become human zoos. Working with United Nations agencies, the Lao government is taking steps to see that rural development proceeds slowly in order to protect these vital resources.

Laos is a place to tread lightly, but foreign travelers are made quite welcome and encouraged to do their part to preserve and participate in cultural practices. The beauty of Laos exists not only along the Mekong at sunset, but also in smiles at the market or impromptu Lao lessons on the street corner, things that are easily missed if you're in a hurry. It's an enchanting land that demands you slow your pace to match its own, and even the shortest visit might add tranquillity to your travels.

1 GETTING TO KNOW LAOS

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Comprising 147,201 sq. km (57,408 sq. miles), roughly the size of Great Britain or the state of Utah, Laos shares borders with China and Myanmar in the north and the northwest, Cambodia in the south, Thailand in the west, and Vietnam in the east. The country is divided into 16 provinces. Seventy percent of its land is mountain ranges and plateaus, and with an estimated population of nearly 5.7 million, Laos is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Asia. Natural landmarks include the Annamite Mountains along the border with Vietnam, as well as the Mekong River, which flows from China and along Laos's border with Thailand. About 55% of the landscape is pristine tropical forest, sheltering such rare and wild animals as elephants, leopards, the Java mongoose, panthers, gibbons, and black bears.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Laos can trace its history as a unified state to the Kingdom of Lane Xang Hon Khao ("one million elephants under a white parasol"). Formed in 1353 by an exiled prince named Fa Ngum, its capital was Muang Xiang Thong, later renamed Luang Prabang, or "Great Prabang," in honor of a gold Buddha image (*prabang*) given to the kingdom by the court at Angkor. For 300 years, Lane Xang was an important and powerful trading center, occupying present-day Laos as well as parts of northern Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

In 1707, a secession crisis caused the kingdom to split into three smaller principalities: Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak. Over the next 100 years, Siam gradually established domination over these mini-kingdoms, sacking Vientiane in 1828 after a rebellion by their handpicked king.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Siamese hegemony was replaced by French rule. By 1907, through treaty as well as force, Siam was obliged to cede all lands east of the Mekong to the French, who in turn united this territory and named it Laos.

World War II saw the occupation of French Indochina by the Japanese, who forced King Sisavangvong to declare Laos's independence in 1945. Japan's surrender later that year created a power vacuum, which the French and the recently organized Lao Issara ("Free Laos") movement, headed by former prime minister Prince Phetsarath, hoped to fill. Early the next year, the French defeated the combined forces of the Laos Issara and

Vietminh, and Prince Phetsarath, along with his half brothers Prince Souvannaphouma and Prince Souphannavong, set up a government-in-exile in Thailand.

Over the next 7 years, the French gradually granted sovereignty to Laos, culminating in full independence in 1953. During this period, Souvannaphouma returned to Laos to negotiate with the French, while Souphannavong (the "Red Prince") set up the Lao Patriotic Front (widely known as the Pathet Lao) in northwestern Vietnam. Accompanying invading Vietminh forces, the Pathet Lao soon established a stronghold in the northeastern town of Sam Neua.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw numerous attempts at coalition building between the neutralists, rightists, and communists mediated by Prince Phetsarath, but these governments all collapsed. The Second Geneva Convention held in 1961 and 1962 reestablished Laos's neutrality and formed another coalition government under Souvannaphouma. This one failed as well, and the country descended into civil war. The Pathet Lao, with help from North Vietnamese troops still in Laos in violation of the Geneva Conventions, took control over most of eastern and northeastern Laos.

As the civil war and the wider Indochina conflict intensified, the U.S. began its secret bombing campaign over eastern Laos, targeting communist bases and the Ho Chi Minh trail. From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped more tonnage of bombs on Xieng Khouang, Huaphan, and Phongsali provinces than were dropped on the whole of Europe during World War II. It is estimated that an average of one bombing run was flown every 8 minutes for 9 years.

With the U.S. trying to end its involvement in the region, a cease-fire was reached in 1973, and by 1975, with the U.S. fully withdrawn, the whole of Laos fell to the Pathet Lao. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was formed with Kaysone Phomvihane, a longtime behind-the-scenes communist organizer, installed as prime minister and Prince Souphannavong as president. Draconion political and economic policies followed, including the relocation of many members of the previous government, including the royal family, into "re-education camps" (the king died within 4 years). An additional 10% of the population fled the country, with an estimated 250,000 eventually settling in the U.S.

During the 1980s and 1990s, progressively more liberalized economic policies were introduced to stir the stagnant economy, producing a more capitalist system. Tourism was also embraced, as the government could not ignore the tourist boom occurring throughout Southeast Asia, especially in neighboring Thailand. Concerted governmental efforts, as well as improved relations with Thailand and the resultant Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge connecting Nong Khai and Vientiane, have helped Laos court the tourist dollar. While only an estimated 33,000 travelers visited Laos in 1991, more than one million arrived in 2008, bringing in more than $150 million and making tourism one of the leading sources of foreign exchange. Unfortunately, the relaxation of economic policies has not gone hand-in-hand with the easing of political controls. Although they have been inept at implementing strict socialist doctrine, the communist People's Revolutionary Party retains a stranglehold on power to this day.

THE LAO PEOPLE & CULTURE

In a recent study, a group of Russian ethnologists estimated that there are more than 100 distinct ethnic groups in Laos, but it is commonly believed that Laotians fall into 68 different groups. Only 47 groups have been fully researched and identified; sadly, many are disappearing by attrition or intermarriage. All Lao ethnicities fit into one of three categories. The lowlanders are **Lao Loum**, the majority group, who live along the lower

CHINA
0
100 mi
0
100 km
Railway
Phongsali
Muang Sing
Mohan
Boten
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Luang Nam Tha
Muang Xai
Huay Xai
Nam Ou
Nam Seuang
Mekong
Pakbeng
Chiang Khong
Luang Prabang
Plain of Jars
Xieng Ngoen
Sainyabuli
Kasi
Nam Ngum
Vang Vieng
Nam Ang
Ang Nam Ngum
Phon Hong
Pak Lai
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Udon Thani
THAILAND
Dien Bien Phu
VIETNAM
Hanoi
Haiphong
Sam Neua
Vieng Xai
Hua Muang
Nong Haet
Muang Kham
Phonsavan
LAOS
Vinh
Gulf of Tonkin
Pakxan
Mekong
Nakhon Phanom
Tha Khaek
Se Noi
Savannakhet
Xepon
Hue
Mukdahan
Phim
Lao Bao
Salavan
Ubon Ratchathani
Pakse
Nakhon Ratchasima
Chong Mek
Champasak
Pathum Phon
Bangkok
Voeung Kam
Siem Reap
CAMBODIA
Gulf of Thailand

Mekong and in Vientiane. The **Lao Theung**, low mountain dwellers, live on mountain slopes, and the **Lao Soung** are the hill tribes, or *montagnards*. Eighty percent of the population lives in villages or small hamlets, practicing subsistence farming.

The earliest Lao religions were animist, and most hill tribes still practice this belief, often in combination with Buddhism. In minority villages, you'll see elaborate spirit gates, small structures of bamboo and wood often depicting weapons to protect the village (tread lightly if you come across one of these markers, as they are of great significance; touching or even photographing them is a major faux pas). Buddhism predominates, though, and 60% to 80% of all Laotians are practicing Theravada Buddhists. In the morning, monks walk the streets collecting food or alms, eagerly given by the Laotians, who believe it will aid them in the next life. Laotians worship regularly and can often be seen making temple visits. Most young males spend at least 3 months in a *wat*, or monastery, usually around the time of puberty or before they marry. Impressive religious art and architecture are created in a singular Lao style, particularly the "standing" or "praying for rain" Buddha, upright with hands pointing straight down at the earth.

Music and dance are integral to the Lao character, and you'll get a taste of it during your stay. Folk or *khaen* music is played with a reed mouth organ, often accompanied by a boxed string instrument. The *lamvong* is the national folk dance, in which participants dance in concentric circles. Don't miss a **Baci ceremony**, in which a circle of celebrants chant and sing to honor or bless an event.

Laotians are friendly and easygoing, but you might find it hard to make a close friend. Language will usually be a barrier. Solo travelers probably have the best chance of making entry into society, and any effort with the Lao language goes a long way. While Laos suffered brutally throughout its colonial history and most horrifically during the Vietnam War, the Lao people want to move on to peace and prosperity rather than dwell on the past. It's very unlikely that an American will be approached with recrimination, but memories are still fresh. Lao people still deal with war fallout literally and figuratively, a result of the unexploded bombs (UXO) that litter 50% of the country.

ETIQUETTE

The Lao are generally tolerant people, but there are a few things to keep in mind. First, upon entering a temple or *wat*, you must always remove your shoes. There will usually be a sign, but a good rule of thumb is to take them off before mounting the last flight of stairs. You should also take off your shoes before entering a private home, unless told otherwise.

Dress modestly. It's unusual to see bare Lao skin above the elbow or even above the midcalf. Longer shorts and even sleeveless tops are permissible for foreigners of both sexes, but short shorts or skirts and bare bosoms and navels will cause stares and possibly offense, especially in a *wat*.

Avoid public displays of affection between men and women. Remember that monks are not permitted to touch women or even to speak directly to them anywhere but inside a temple; therefore, women should never try to shake hands with or even hand something directly to a monk. On buses, you'll find that Lao people will change seats so that monks sit only near men.

The traditional greeting (also a gesture of thanks and farewell) is called the *nop* or *wai*, a slight bow performed with hands in a prayer position. There are many subtleties to the gesture, but best to just return the greeting if you're given one.

The head is considered the most sacred part of the body, while the feet are the lowliest. Therefore, do not casually touch another person's head or even nonchalantly tussle the

hair of a child. Don't sit with your legs crossed or otherwise point your feet at something or someone, especially Buddha images. As in most cultures, pointing with the finger is also considered rude; Laotians often use a palms-up hand gesture when signifying direction or indicating a person or thing. If you are seated on the floor, men may sit with the legs crossed, but women should tuck them to one side.

Lao people take a gentle approach to human relationships. A person showing violence or ill temper is regarded with surprise and disapproval. A calm approach will take you further. Patient persistence and a smile always win out, especially when haggling. It is important to haggle, of course, but just one or two go-rounds are usually enough, and "no" means no.

LANGUAGE

The Lao language resembles Thai, with familiar tones and sounds found in each. While some vocabulary words might cross over, the two tongues—spoken and written—are quite distinct. However, many Lao understand Thai (learned from school texts and TV), so if you've picked up some words and phrases in Thailand, they'll still be useful here; people will understand and correct you with the appropriate Lao phrase.

Thankfully, many people in Vientiane and Luang Prabang speak English, and older citizens will usually be able to speak French. Russian is not uncommon, and Chinese is growing in accord with the rising Chinese population (mostly in the north).

Like Thai, Lao has no officially recognized method of Roman alphabet transliteration. As a result, even town and street names have copious spelling irregularities, so for the vocabulary below, only phonetic pronunciations are listed. Most Lao will understand you, even without proper tones, and will appreciate your efforts to speak their language.

When trying to figure out the correct pronunciation of certain names, it's helpful to remember that the original transliteration of Lao was done by francophones, so consider the French pronunciation when faced with a new word. For example, in Vientiane (pronounced wee-en-*chan*), the wide central avenue spelled Lane Xang is pronounced *Lahn Sahng*. Also in Vientiane, Mixay sounds like *Mee*-sigh. Phonexay is *Pawn*-sigh. It takes awhile, but it's easy to pick up.

Useful Lao Phrases

Hello	**Sa bai dee**
Goodbye	**Laa gawn**
Thank you	**Khawp jai**
Thank you very much	**Khawp jai lai lai/khawp jai deuh**
You're welcome/it's nothing	**Baw pen nyahng**
No problem	**Baw mi banhaa**
How are you?	**Sa bai dee baw?**
I'm fine/I'm not fine	**Sabai dee/baw sabai**
Yes	**Chow**
No	**Baw/baw men**
Excuse me	**Khaw toht**
I don't understand	**Baw kao jai**
Do you speak English/French?	**Passah Angit/Falang dai baw?**
How do you say that in Lao?	**Ani passah Lao ee-yahng?**
Where is the toilet?	**Hawng nam yoo sai?**

May I wear shoes here?	**Sai gup pen nyanhg baw?**
Where are you going?	**Pai sai?**
I'm going traveling/to the market/to eat	**Pai tiao/pai talat/pai gin kao**
I want to go to . . .	**Koi yak pai . . .**
Do you have . . . ?	**Mii . . . baw?**
drinking water	**nam-deum**
a room	**hawng**
I would like . . .	**Kaaw . . .**
coffee (black)/with cream	**café dahm/café sai nom**
tea	**nam saa**
How much kip/baht/dollar?	**Tao dai keep/baht/dollah?**
Expensive/too expensive	**Paeng/paeng poht**
Can you make it cheaper?	**Loht dai baw?**
Help!	**Soi neh!**
Call the police!	**Toh-ha tam louat!**

2 THE BEST OF LAOS IN 1 WEEK

Tourism in Laos is still a relatively new phenomenon and as such, the number of tourist "spots" is still very limited. The only stop that must be included on any Laos itinerary is the ancient capital of Luang Prabang. While some visitors get stuck for weeks or even months in Luang Prabang, the suggested plan below calls for only a couple of days there out of 1 week in the country. This gives you enough time to hit the two most important and interesting cities, Vientiane and Luang Prabang, as well as mix in some outdoor adventure along the caves and rivers in and around Vang Vieng.

Days ❶–❷: Vientiane ★★

If you're arriving from Bangkok, the capital will most likely be the site of your introduction to Laos. Stay at the **Settha Palace**, the most luxurious downtown hotel. Get used to the pace of the sleepiest capital in the world by walking the tree-lined streets. Head over to the **Morning Market**, home of the best bargain hand-made silks and handicrafts in Laos, and bargain hard (and politely). Afterward, sip a Beer Lao at one of the makeshift bars and restaurants lining the Mekong River and watch the sun set over neighboring Thailand. Head back to your hotel and cap off the night with the fine French cuisine at **La Belle Epoque**. The next morning, hire a jumbo and visit the odd but fascinating statues at the **Buddha Park**, followed by stops at **Wat Si Saket**, home to more than 10,000 Buddha statues, and the golden **Phra That Luang**. Spend the rest of the afternoon ducking into the many silk and clothing stores lining the streets near the riverfront. For dinner, experience the best of Lao cuisine at **Kua Lao**. After your meal, hear the latest travel news and gossip at **Khop Chai Deu**.

Days ❸–❹: Vang Vieng ★

Take the early bus to Vang Vieng, a 4-hour journey. Once settled, get a local map from your hotel, rent a bicycle, and trek out to **Phu Kham Cave**, stopping at some of the smaller caves along the way. Spend your evening by the river watching the sun

dip behind the distant karst peaks. For your second day, set up a **kayaking** tour on the Nam Song River with Green Discovery.

Days ❺–❼: Luang Prabang ★★★

An early morning minibus on winding roads through beautiful mountain scenery (keep your camera within reach) drops you off in Luang Prabang before dinner. The long journey will leave you a little worse for the wear, so splurge and have a mind-erasing spa treatment at **La Résidence Phou Vao**. Wake up at dawn and **make merit** by giving rice to the monks receiving their daily alms. Stroll the streets of the temple district and admire the glass mosaics at **Wat Xieng Thong**. Duck into any of the numerous smaller temples and chat with one of the novice monks in residence. After lunch, get a break from the heat at the **Royal Palace Museum**. Then cross the street and hike to the top of **Mount Phousi** to enjoy the panoramic view. Spend the evening dining at **L'Elephant**, followed by a stroll through the **Night Market**. The next morning, take a longtail boat up the Mekong to the **Pak Ou Caves**. Spend the afternoon back in the temple district, soaking up the atmosphere at a street-side cafe and, at dusk, listening to the monks chant their evening prayers.

Day ❽: Try to Leave

As hard as it might be to accept, the real world beckons. Say goodbye to Laos. Fly to Bangkok and connect with your return flight home.

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO LAOS

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Lao Tourism Authority serves as more of an administrative arm of the government than an information service for visitors. It provides some basic brochures if contacted at the **National Tourism Authority of Lao P.D.R.**, 08/02 Lane Xang Ave., P.O. Box 2511, Vientiane, Lao P.D.R. (✆ **021/212-248** or 021/212-251; fax 021/212-769; www.tourismlaos.gov.la). The information office in Vientiane has a few good English speakers and is not a bad place to start.

Sayo Magazine (www.sayolaos.com) is available at hotels and bookstores for 19,000 kip ($2.20/£1.45) and features articles on local dining, fashion, and happenings.

The official Visit Laos website, **www.visit-laos.com**, is sponsored by both the Lao government and private organizations. This site is detailed and accurate, and provides links to other sources of information in the region. For current domestic and international news and government affairs, log on to **www.laoembassy.com**, sponsored and maintained by the Lao Embassy in Washington, D.C. Below are Lao embassy and consulate locations overseas.

- **In the U.S.**: 2222 S St. NW, Washington, DC 20008 (✆ **202/332-6416**; fax 202/332-4923; www.laoembassy.com); or 317 E. 51st St., New York, NY 10022 (✆ **212/832-2734**; fax 212/750-0039; www.laoembassy.com/laomission/index.html).
- **In Australia:** 1 Dalmain Crescent, O'Malley, Canberra, ACT 2606 (✆ **02/6286-4595**; fax 02/6290-1910).
- **In Thailand:** 520/502/1–3 Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Wangthonglang, Bangkok 10310, Pracha Uthit Road (end of Soi Ramkhamhaeng 39; ✆ **539-6667-8** or 539-7341; fax 539-3827 or 539-6678; www.bkklaoembassy.com).

Tips Booking Air Travel in Laos

Making your own air arrangements from Vientiane or Luang Prabang is simple, and most travel offices can help for a small fee.

Lao Airlines has offices in Vientiane at 2 Pangkham Rd. (✆ **021/212-051**, or 021/212-052 for reservations; www.laoairlines.com), the best place to book domestic flights. Smaller booking offices, such as **Lao Air Booking Co.** (43/3 Setthathirat Rd., just south of Namphu in Vientiane; ✆ **021/216-761**), are good for purchasing regional connections on international carriers.

ORGANIZED TOURS & TRAVEL AGENTS

In chapter 3, we've outlined major tour operators that organize trips throughout the region (p. 51). Getting around underdeveloped Laos can be difficult, making organized travel the simplest option here.

Independent travel is quite feasible, though, and the same companies that organize group tours can help with hotel and travel arrangements and even create independent tour itineraries.

The most established and widely represented agencies provide basic, mainstream tours to most provinces for either short trips or extended visits. Destinations include in and around Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang (Plain of Jars), and Champasak, plus visits to Laos's hill tribes, adventure trips, and ecotourism excursions. When arranging travel with even the larger tour operators, be absolutely clear about the specifics (meals included, driver's expenses, taxes, and so forth). Many tour companies offer the world and come up short. Below are recommended tour operators that offer Laos itineraries.

- **Diethelm Travel**, Namphu Square, Setthathirat Road, P.O. Box 2657, Vientiane (✆ **021/213-833** or 020/248-9197; fax 021/217-151; www.diethelmtravel.com), is open Monday through Friday from 8am to noon and 1:30 to 5pm, Saturday from 8am to noon, and operates almost like a de facto tourist information and help center. The folks here are the most professional in the country and can arrange deluxe, personalized trips that cover all the necessities. Offices are in all major towns (locations are listed in the sections on each town in this chapter).
- **Exotissimo Travel**, Pangkham Street, Vientiane (✆ **021/241-861**; fax 021/262-001; www.exotissimo.com), is a slick and helpful French-owned company. It offers fine upscale group, individual, classic, and ecotourism itineraries.
- **Green Discovery**, 54 Setthathirat Rd., Nam Phu Fountain Circle, Vientiane (✆ **021/223-022**; www.greendiscoverylaos.com), offers exciting rafting, kayaking, climbing, cycling, and trekking excursions ranging from 1-day trips to 1-month expeditions. The helpful international staff caters to both budget travelers and well-heeled adventurers.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Visitors need a valid passport and visa to visit Laos. There are a number of entry sites where visas are granted upon arrival: by air to Vientiane or Luang Prabang, or when crossing from Thailand over the Friendship Bridge between Vientiane and Nong Khai, or between Chiang Khong and Houayxai in the far north, and Mukhdahan and Savannakhet or Chong Mek and Vung Tao (near Pakse) in the far south. When coming from Vietnam, be sure to have a prearranged visa. A 30-day visa costs $35 (£23) for U.S. and

U.K. citizens, $42 (£28) for Canadians. At an embassy outside of Laos, the going rate for a 30-day visa is $50 (£33), and you'll have to wait up to 5 days for processing (less in Bangkok). For a fee, travel agents in Thailand and other countries in the region can help you jump over the bureaucratic hurdles and get a visa in 1 day. Check the Lao Embassy site at **www.laoembassy.com** for details.

Once in Laos, you can extend your visa up to 30 days at $3 (£2) per day. It's best to do this through a travel agent. Many hotels, guesthouses, and tour operators offer the service as well; **Diethelm Travel**, described above, has a counter devoted solely to visa affairs. **Lao Tourism** (08/02 Lane Xang Ave., adjacent to the National Tourism Authority) is a government agency and a good choice.

Visa overstay costs $10 (£6.65) per day, levied when you exit the country.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

You may bring 500 cigarettes, 100 cigars, or 500 grams of tobacco; 1 liter of alcohol; two bottles of wine; and unlimited amounts of money, all for personal use, into Laos without taxation or penalty—not that the Customs officials do much, if any, searching. However, if you purchase silver or copper items during your stay, you might be required to pay duty upon exiting Laos, according to their weight. Antiques, especially Buddha images or parts thereof, are not permitted to leave the country.

MONEY

The **kip** (pronounced *keep*), the official Lao unit of currency, comes in denominations of 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, and, only recently issued by the Lao government, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 notes. The new notes are an improvement, but with the current exchange rate (at press time, **8,637 kip = $1**), that still means that the largest unit of currency is just $5.80/£3.85. For your larger purchases, you'll want to use **U.S. dollars**, accepted widely, or **Thai baht**, commonly accepted but more popular near the border. Be prepared to handle bricks of Lao cash when you exchange foreign currency.

Laos is still very much a cash country, especially outside Vientiane. A new government decree requires service providers to list prices in Lao kip, but virtually all hotel and guesthouse rates, upmarket restaurant prices, transportation charges, and expensive items' price tags can quote prices in U.S. dollars as well. Use kip for smaller purchases, local transportation, and pocket money. Remember to exchange your kip into dollars or baht before leaving Laos. Kip cannot be exchanged outside of the country.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE You can exchange currency at Wattay International Airport, hotels, banks, and on the black market, with the rate of exchange worst at hotels and best on the black market (though the difference is negligible). Because the U.S. dollar is so widely accepted, it's not a bad idea to change traveler's checks to dollars at a major bank (usually for a 2% fee) before going for any extended time out of the larger towns.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Traveler's checks in U.S. dollars and other major currencies are accepted in all banks in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and some in Xieng Khouang and Pakse, but rarely by vendors.

CREDIT CARDS Credit cards are gaining wider acceptance at hotels and restaurants, but many are still cash-only. Lao Airlines accepts American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. You can get cash advances on your Visa card at **La Banque Pour Le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL)** and at **Lane Xang Bank** branches in larger towns throughout the country. Both banks have ATM service.

To report a lost or stolen American Express card, contact **Diethelm Travel**, Setthathirat Road, Namphu Square, Vientiane (✆ **021/213-833** or 021/215-920; www.diethelmtravel.com). For other cards, call the hot lines in Bangkok (p. 70).

WHEN TO GO

High season for tourism is November through March and the month of August, when weather conditions are favorable, plus the Lao New Year in the middle of April. Accommodations run at full capacity and transportation can be overbooked at these times.

CLIMATE Laos's tropical climate ushers in a wet monsoon season lasting from early May through October, followed by a dry season from November through April. In Vientiane, average temperatures range from 71°F (22°C) in January to 84°F (29°C) in April. The northern regions, which include Xieng Khouang, get chilly from November to February and can approach freezing temperatures at night in mountainous areas. Beginning in mid-February, temperatures gradually climb, and April can see temperatures over 100°F (38°C). In order to avoid the rain and heat, the best time to visit the south is probably November through February. In the mountains of the north, May through July means still-comfortable temperatures.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS Businesses and government offices close for these holidays, but restaurants remain open. Ask about local festivals; on the full moon of each month, called a *boun*, there's always a festival somewhere—not to be missed.

- **International New Year's Day**: January 1, nationwide. Your standard countdown and party, sans Dick Clark.
- **Lao New Year (Pimai Lao)**: Full moon in mid-April, nationwide. The Luang Prabang festivities include a procession, a fair, a sand-castle competition on the Mekong, a Miss New Year pageant, folk performances, and cultural shows. Make sure you're booked and confirmed in hotels before you go.
- **Buddhist Lent (Boun Khao Phansaa)**: At local temples, worshipers in brightly colored silks greet the dawn on Buddhist Lent by offering gifts to the monks and pouring water into the ground as a gesture of offering to their ancestors. Lent begins in July and lasts 3 months. Monks are meant to stay at their temple throughout this time, for more rigorous practice. Lent ends in the joyous **Boun Ok Phansa** holiday in September, usually commemorated with boat races (see below), carnivals, and the release of hundreds of candle-bearing paper and bamboo floats on the country's rivers.
- **Dragon Boat Races (Bun Song Hua)**: Held at different times in late summer and early fall in every riverside town, these races celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent. Teams of 50 paddle longboats in a long sprint, and winners parade through town. The Vientiane Boat Race Festival (Vientiane and Savannakhet) is held the second weekend in October. The Luang Prabang Boat Races are held in early September along the Nam Kan, with a major market day preceding the races and festivities throughout the night on race day.
- **That Luang Festival**: Full moon in early November, Vientiane. This major Buddhist fete draws the faithful countrywide and from nearby Thailand. Before dawn, thousands join in a ceremonial offering and group prayer, followed by a procession. For days afterward, a combined trade fair and carnival offers handicrafts, flowers, games, concerts, and dance shows.
- **Hmong New Year**: End of November/beginning of December, in the north. Although this is not a national holiday, it's celebrated among this northern hill tribe.

- **National Day**: December 2, nationwide. The entire country celebrates a public holiday, while in Vientiane, you'll find parades and dancing at That Luang temple.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for information on the major health issues that affect travelers to Southeast Asia and recommended precautions for avoiding the most common diseases. It's also a good idea to check the most recent information at the **Centers for Disease Control** (click "Travelers' Health" at **www.cdc.gov**).

No water in Laos is considered potable, so stick with bottled water. Also, Lao cuisine uses many fresh ingredients and garnishes, and condiments made from dried fish that might have been stored under unsanitary conditions. Exercise caution when eating from roadside and market stalls and smaller local restaurants.

In Laos, medical facilities are scarce and rudimentary. Emergency medical facilities exist in Vientiane, but outside the capital you'll require medical evacuation. Contact information is provided under "Fast Facts: Laos," below.

SAFETY CONCERNS Visitors to Laos should refer to their home country's overseas travel bureau or with the **U.S. State Department** (click "Travel Warnings" at **www.travel.state.gov**) to learn more about the present situation in the area. Laos is not a dangerous destination, but it's important to remember that the current climate of calm and openness to visitors is historically quite new. Visitors should keep an ear to the ground when in the country.

Travelers in the countryside should also remember that bus and boat breakdowns are frequent. Additionally, road conditions and poor infrastructure make rural travel unpredictable. Hospital facilities, even in the capital, are rudimentary at best, and any serious medical conditions require evacuation. UXO, unexploded ordnance left from years of conflict, is still a major concern, especially in Xieng Khouang near the Plain of Jars. It should also be mentioned that Lao Airlines has yet to pass any international standards for safety.

Warning: Although the period between 2000 and 2005 saw sporadic attacks by Hmong rebels on buses traveling via Route 13, just north of Vang Vieng, things have quieted down since then and hundreds of the rebels have surrendered to government forces. Still, the threat lingers, and local buses that ply the route have an employee on board with a concealed automatic weapon just in case.

GETTING THERE

Official land borders are with China, Vietnam, and Thailand *only*, and not all border points are open to Western nationals. For example, to China, the crossing point is at Boten, and though it looks encouraging on a map, you cannot cross north of Muang Sing. Similarly, the Laos-Vietnam borders in the north at Dien Bien Phu and Sam Neua are not open; only in the south at Lao Bao can you cross to and from Vietnam.

BY PLANE Bangkok is Laos's main link with global air routes. In addition, regular flights from neighboring Vietnam and Cambodia make it easy to hop a direct flight from anywhere in Southeast Asia to Vientiane's **Wattay International Airport**. See the individual country chapters for carriers to the destinations mentioned above.

Lao Airlines (formerly Lao Aviation) runs both domestic and international routes. The main office in Vientiane is at 2 Pangkham Rd. (✆ **021/212-051**, or 021/212-052 for reservations; www.laoairlines.com). Lao Airlines connects Vientiane with Bangkok,

Chiang Mai, Kunming, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, and Siem Reap. It's also possible to fly from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hanoi, or Siam Reap directly to Luang Prabang. Other convenient routes link Cambodia (Phnom Penh and Siem Reap) and Pakse. **Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways**, and **Vietnam Airlines** also provide service to Laos. Check www.bangkokair.com for information about new Bangkok Airways routes between the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Bangkok, Sukhothai, Luang Prabang, and Hue.

Note: There is an international departure tax of $10 (£6.65), payable in any currency (dollars/euros/baht/kip). This may be included in the price of your airline ticket, depending on the carrier.

BY TRAIN The State Railway of Thailand's northeastern line originates at Bangkok's Hua Lampong Railway Station (✆ **02223-7010** or 1690). Running north, it connects many major provincial capitals in Isaan, Thailand's northeastern region, before terminating at Nong Khai, opposite Vientiane.

Once in Nong Khai, hire a tuk-tuk from the train station to the immigration checkpoint at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (about 40B/$1.15/70p per person for the trip; open daily 8:30am–5pm). Once across to Laos, you can take a taxi, tuk-tuk, or minibus to Vientiane. Prices are set at 300B ($8.55/£5.45) for a taxi, 250B ($7.15/£4.55) for a tuk-tuk, and 350B ($10/£6.35) per person for a minibus. There is also frequent bus service to the Morning Market in Vientiane for just 3,000 kip (35¢/25p). Walk to the bus stop on the far side of the gravel parking lot and wait for the no. 14 bus. Another choice is to hire a tuk-tuk to the Nong Khai bus station and take the Nong Khai/Vientiane bus for 55B ($1.55/£1; six departures daily).

Connecting with Pakse in the south of Laos is also possible by train from Bangkok via the Thai terminus at Ubon Ratchathani. From Ubon to the Lao border and on to Pakse means two long bus rides (the best you'll get from the Lao border to Pakse is an overcrowded *songthaew*, or pickup truck).

BY BUS Tourist buses—the VIP, reclining-seat, air-conditioned variety—connect Bangkok and Vientiane via the Friendship Bridge. The overnight trip can be booked through most tour services for about 700B ($20/£13) and will leave you at the Thai side of the border. Buses also run regularly from both Nong Khai and Udonthani, for 55B ($1.55/£1) and 80B ($2.30/£1.45) respectively, via the Friendship Bridge.

BY BOAT The Mekong border crossing between Thailand's Chiang Khong (near Chiang Mai) and Laos's Houayxay is popular. From the border, it's a lazy 2-day boat ride on the Mekong to Luang Prabang (see "Getting Around," below). At the time of this writing, a 15-day visa was available on arrival.

Additional ferry crossing points along the Mekong are between Mukhdahan (Thailand) and Thakhek (Laos), and between Mukhdahan (near Ubon in Thailand) and Chong Mek (Laos).

GETTING AROUND

Navigating on foot through Laos's small cities is easy. You can use taxis and tuk-tuks (covered carts behind motorbikes) in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Pakse, or you can rent bicycles and motorbikes in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Vang Vieng.

Getting around the country, however, is a different story. Laos's underdeveloped infrastructure begs caution. See "Health & Safety," above, and note the poor road conditions, especially during the rainy season and in the north. Often-overcrowded public transport relegates road and river travel to only the hearty.

That said, these very obstacles are what attract many to traveling in Laos; there's nothing like the feel of pulling into a northern town covered in dust or hopping from a boat to a muddy riverbank in a rural village to be greeted by a friendly delegation of kids. For many, though, the difficulties outweigh (or overshadow) any reward. Arm yourself with the most up-to-date information if you're traveling far out of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and consider carefully the travel options below.

BY PLANE Contact **Lao Airlines** (✆ **021/212-051**; www.laoairlines.com) for details on domestic routes. Ticket prices are 660,000 kip ($76/£51) from Vientiane to Xieng Kouang, 1,310,000 kip ($152/£101) from Luang Prabang to Pakse. Lao Airlines accepts payment in U.S. dollars, traveler's checks, Lao kip, and most major credit cards.

Lao Westcoast Helicopter Company (✆ **021/512-023**) will charter a whirlybird to take you where you need to go, at your convenience. A 1-hour ride will set you and three friends back $1,839 (£1,226).

BY BUS Korean-made public buses and minibuses connect most towns; however, many areas (especially in the north) are still served only by *songthaew,* four-valve pickup trucks fitted with open-sided covers and bench seats. Private companies handle long-haul routes from Vientiane north to Luang Prabang and south to Savannakhet. Regular buses are often overcrowded, which can mean sitting on a plastic chair in the center aisle with a bag of chickens or pigs wriggling at your feet. These buses stop frequently for new passengers and rest stops at rural roadsides. It's good grist for travel journals, but harrowing. VIP buses, when available, are a good choice. They boast more legroom, they don't overbook, and they keep unscheduled stops to a minimum.

BY CAR One alternative is to hire a private car with a driver (self-drive vehicles are virtually impossible to find). Contacts for car hires are listed in each corresponding section to follow.

BY BOAT **Tour boats** operated by **Luang Say Cruises** (✆ **021/215-958** in Vientiane, or 071/252-553 in Luang Prabang; www.asian-oasis.com) are a luxury option along the Mekong both in the north between Thailand and Luang Prabang and in the south from Pakse. See the appropriate sections for details.

Riverboats ply the length of the Mekong in Laos, and smaller boats of the longtail variety navigate lesser waterways throughout the country (particularly in the north). On some routes, departures are so infrequent that travelers need to charter boats for themselves, a true exercise in patience. The 2-day **slow boat** from the Thai border town of Houayxay (with an overnight in Pak Beng) is popular.

Another option is a **speedboat** hire, which gets you there much faster but via a bone-jarring ride that, though brief, is more uncomfortable and much more dangerous than riding the barge (earplugs are recommended; many opt for the helmets offered, too). Local boats from Pakse to Champasak and farther south are a possibility but are similarly uncomfortable and loosely scheduled.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Book your hotel early during peak season (Aug and Nov–Mar), using travel agents and tour operators as necessary. Also be aware that most hotels in Luang Prabang are full during the Lao New Year, when thousands of tourists, both foreign and Lao, pour into the city for the festivities. Both standards and prices are generally good.

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Laos:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Laos's country code **(856),** the city or local area code (**21** for Vientiane, **71** for Luang Prabang), and the phone number (for example, 011 856 21 000-000). ***Important note***: Omit the initial "0" in all Laos phone numbers when calling from abroad.
- **To place a call within Laos**: Dial the city or area code preceded by a **0** (the way numbers are listed in this book), and then the local number (for example, 021 000-000).
- **To place a direct international call from Laos:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows**: Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

TIPS ON DINING

Lao cuisine is varied and interesting, with sticky rice (or glutinous rice) a staple that, over a longer visit, sometimes loses its appeal through redundancy. Lao fare mixes Thai and Chinese traditions, with a bit of French thrown in for good measure (and a few unique regional favorites). Try it at real restaurants whenever possible—the street stands aren't up to those in neighboring countries. French colonial influence is clear in the many excellent Continental options in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

You'll undoubtedly leave with a few pieces of hand-woven Lao textiles, handcrafted silver, and other lovely objects. Many things are one-of-a-kind, so if you see something you like, get it. Remember that the Lao do, of course, haggle. For foreigners, the starting price might be high, but bargaining here is not as relentless as it is in Laos's neighboring countries.

Fast Facts Laos

American Express The country's one Amex representative is **Diethelm Travel**, Namphu Square, Setthathirat Road, Vientiane (✆ **021/213-833** or 021/215-920; www.diethelmtravel.com).

Business Hours With a few exceptions, hours are 8:30am to noon and 1:30 to 5pm Monday through Friday, 8am to noon on Saturday. Restaurants are open from about 11am to 2pm and 6 to 10pm daily; many are closed for lunch on Sunday.

Drug Laws Opium is openly g rown in nor theast Laos and is easily a vailable, as is marijuana. Neither is legal , and although y ou might see man y travelers indulging, it is highly r ecommended that y ou don't. You could face high fines or jail if you're caught.

Electricity Laos runs on 220-v olt electrical currents. Plugs are two-pronged, with either r ound or flat pr ongs. If y ou're c oming fr om the U .S. and y ou must bring electrical appliances, bring y our own converter and adapter. Outside of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, electricity is sketchy, and sometimes a vailable for only a f ew hours a da y. A sur ge pr otector is a must f or laptops.

Embassies **U.S.**: Thatdam Bartholonie Road, Vientiane (✆ **021/267-000**; fax 021/212-584; http://vientiane.usembassy.gov). **Australia**: Nehru Road , Bane Phonsa y, Vientiane (✆ **021/413-600**; www.laos.embassy.gov.au). The A ustralian embassy also assists nationals of C anada, New Z ealand, and the U .K.

Emergencies I n Vientiane, dial ✆ **191** for police, ✆ **190** for fire, and ✆ **195** for an ambulance. For medical evacuation, call **Lao Westcoast Helicopter Company** (✆ **021/512-023**) in Vientiane.

Hospitals M edical car e in Laos is primitiv e b y Western standar ds. F or major problems, most f oreigners choose t o hop the bor der t o Thailand f or the **Nong Khai Wattana G eneral Hospital** (just o ver the F riendship Bridge). I n an emergency, call ✆ **66-42/465-201**. Vientiane has one 24-hour **International Medical Clinic**, Mahosot Hospital, on Fa Ngum Road at the Mekong riverbank (✆ **021/214-022**). F or emer gency evacuation, call **Lao Westcoast Helic opter C ompany** (✆ **021/512-023**) in Vientiane.

Internet Access You can find I nternet cafes in the main t ourist towns. The cheapest ser vice is f ound in Vientiane and L uang P rabang, wher e c onnections ar e generally fast. Wireless ac cess is no w a vailable in both cities , but c onnections are slo w.

Language The national language of Laos is *Lao*, which is similar t o Thai. Many people understand Thai, and in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, many speak English. A rar e f ew also speak Russian and F rench, and M andarin Chinese is g rowing concurrently with the Chinese population (mostly in the nor th). S ee "Language," p. 211, f or mor e information.

Liquor Laws There are no r eal liquor la ws in Laos , but most bars r efuse t o admit patrons age 17 and under . Bars usually close ar ound midnight.

Mail A lett er or post card should take about 10 da ys t o r each the U .S. O verseas postage runs about 33,000 k ip ($3.80/£2.55) f or 100 g rams, and up t o 138,000 kip ($16/£11) f or 500 g rams. Postcards are 8,500 k ip ($1/65p). The mail ser vice is unreliable, however, so if you're sending something important, use an express-mail service. **FedEx** (✆ **021/223-278**) and **DHL** (✆ **021/216-830**) ha ve offices in the major cities.

Safety Buddhist Laos is an ex tremely saf e c ountry b y an y standar d. Violent or even pett y crime is not a big risk f or t ourists. There ha ve been rar e instances of robbery or rape in r emote ar eas, ho wever. Thus, solo tra velers should take car e when off the beat en path, ev en on a da y hike. S ome of the c ountry's high ways, such as Rout e 13 near K asi and Rout e 7 in the nor theast, ha ve seen r ebel and

bandit attacks in the past. Although attacks usually target locals, not foreigners, ask around before going too far afield. Of course, petty crime does exist. Watch your belongings, and don't leave valuables in your hotel rooms. When trekking in the north near the Plain of Jars or in the south around the Ho Chi Minh trail, beware of unexposed bombs. Don't stray into remote areas, and don't touch anything on the ground. See "Health & Safety," p. 217, for more information.

Telephones The international country code for Laos is **856**. International calls are charged at a flat 2,000 kip (20¢/15p) rate. There are just 300 phone booths in the whole country, and only a few can make international calls. Most newer hotels have international direct dialing at surcharges of about 10%. Collect calls are impossible, and the long-distance companies haven't made it to Laos yet. Internet cafes often have Internet phone service at 2,000 kip (20¢/15p) per minute and charge 2,000 kip (20¢/15p) for callback service. See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 220, for details.

Phone booths in Laos accept only prepaid phone cards, even for local calls. You can buy phone cards at the post office, telephone office, and minimarts. Laos has no coins.

Mobile phones have come to Laos. If you have a GSM phone with a replaceable SIM card, you can arrange prepaid service in any telecom outlet in the country. Coverage is surprisingly extensive. **Lao Telecom** (www.laotel.com), **Tigo** (www.tigolao.com), and **Tango** (✆ **021/253-001**; www.tangolao.com) are the best and offer a flat international rate of 2,000 kip (20¢/15p) per minute.

Time Zone Laos is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, in the same zone as Bangkok. That makes it 12 hours ahead of the U.S. Eastern Standard Time during the winter months, and 3 hours behind Sydney.

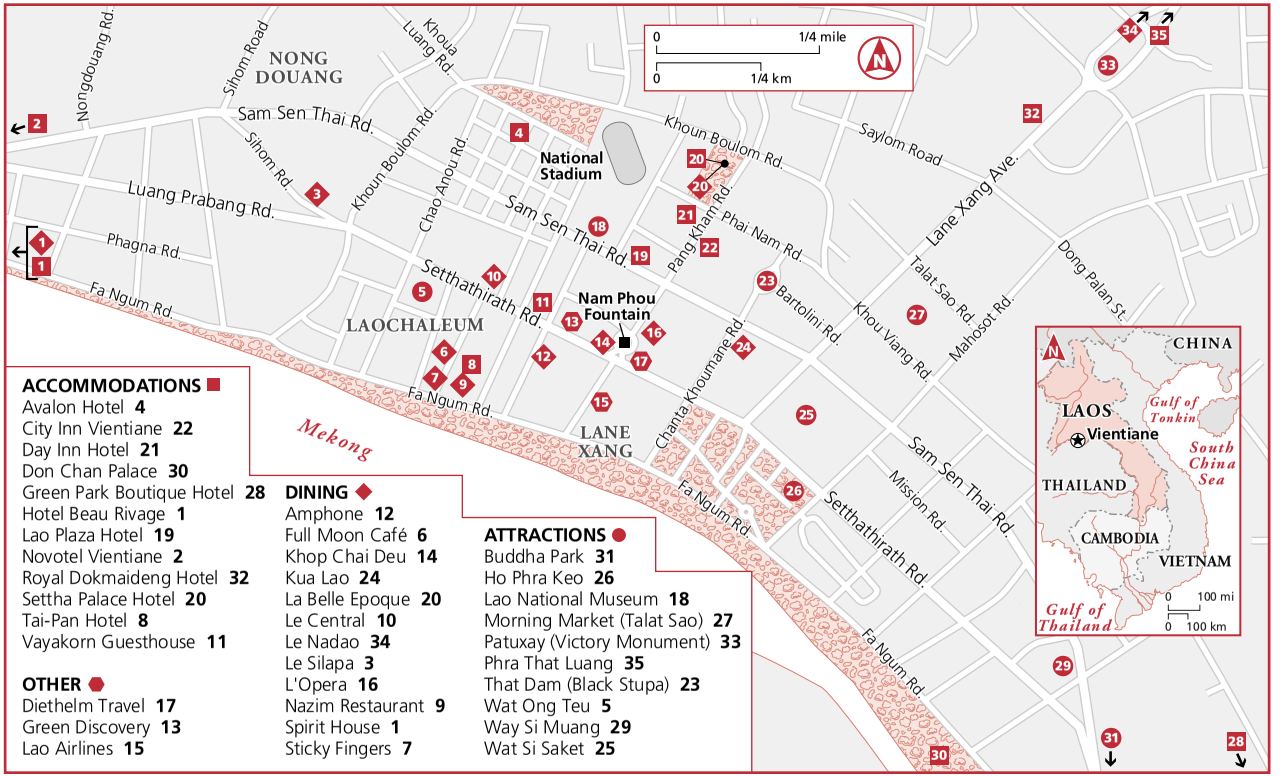
Tipping Tipping has arrived in Laos, particularly in Vientiane. Feel free to tip bellhops, chauffeurs, and tour guides, and to leave 5% to 10% or round up your bill in upscale restaurants. Foreign currency, especially U.S. dollars, is appreciated.

Toilets You'll find Western toilets (sit-down style) in most hotels for foreigners. Out in the boonies, it's mostly the Asian-style "squatty-potty" toilets. Bring your own toilet paper; sanitary hand wipes or lotions are a good idea, too. You'll notice a bowl and a pail of water nearby for flushing (put two or three buckets in). On rural roads, buses just pull to the side for bathroom breaks. In villages, find a convenient tree.

Water Drink only boiled or bottled water, available everywhere for 1,000 kip (10¢/10p). Be wary of ice in any but the finest restaurants. Some people even use boiled or bottled water for tooth brushing.

4 VIENTIANE ★★

Vientiane (Wee-en-*chan*) is one of the few world capitals that lack the look and feel of what most Westerners would consider a "city," much less a capital. Quiet, provincial, sleepy: These are terms that come to mind on seeing Vientiane for the first time. And if you drive into town, you might not even realize when you're actually in the city proper,



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as "metropolitan" Vientiane blends seamlessly with the countryside. Just a short ride in any direction from Lane Xang, the main north-south avenue, will quickly carry you into the beginnings of rural Laos.

But for better or worse, the slow march to modernity seems inevitable, as the massive influx of foreign aid and manpower from both foreign governments and NGOs is bound to reshape the city and dramatically affect those who inhabit it. While recent infrastructure and telecommunications improvements portend greater future transformation, change has still come slowly in Vientiane. Traffic is only a trickle on the city center's beautiful tree-lined boulevard, the people are always armed with their easy and ready smiles, and the city is asleep by 11pm every night.

The city was ransacked by the Siamese in 1828, so it lacks some of the ancient history you find in the former capital of Luang Prabang, but many of Vientiane's temples have been beautifully reconstructed. **That Luang** is the preeminent Buddhist temple in the country and the scene of a huge festival every November. The **Patuxay Victory Monument** is a peculiarly Lao version of the Arc de Triomphe. The **Morning Market** comprises a full city block of goods to explore. And the **Mekong**, lined with picturesque colonials and cozy thatched bars, rolls through the very heart of the city and glows pink at sunset—not to be missed. It's worth a stay of several days to take it all in and enjoy Vientiane's laid-back atmosphere—while it lasts.

GETTING THERE

For more information on arriving by plane or by train, see p. 217.

BY PLANE Vientiane is Laos's major international hub for air travel. If you're arriving via **Wattay International Airport** in Vientiane, a taxi to town will cost 50,000 kip ($5.80/£3.85).

BY BUS The **Northern Bus Station** (✆ **021/260-555**) connects Vientiane with all destinations in Laos. The bus station at the **Morning Market** (✆ **021/216-507**), which is called **Talat Sao** in Lao, is the hub for local buses as well as those linking Vientiane with Nong Khai and Udonthani in Thailand via the Friendship Bridge.

GETTING AROUND

The city lies on the east side of the Mekong River (the western bank is Thailand). The main streets, running parallel to each other, are Samsenthai and Setthathirat, with Lane Xang, the north-south artery, intersecting them. The heart of the city is Nam Phu Fountain, and many of the directions in this chapter are given in relation to it.

Central Vientiane is easily covered on foot. You can also hire a **tuk-tuk**, a covered cart behind a motorbike, or a **jumbo**, a bigger version of the same. Drivers charge about 10,000 kip to 20,000 kip ($1.15–$2.30/75p–£1.55) around town; settle the price before you ride. Bikes are a great way to get around town. Both bicycle and motorcycle rentals are available at many storefronts along Fa Ngum Road near the river or along Samsenthai. You can also rent a car with driver for 600,000 kip ($70/£46) per day around town. Trips farther afield will cost between $80 and $90 (£53–£60). Call **Asia Vehicle Rental** (✆ **021/217-493**; www.avr.laopdr.com), or inquire at any hotel front desk. Daily rates for sedans start at $60 (£40).

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

There is a tourist information office on Lane Xang Avenue, just north of the Morning Market. Also see "Organized Tours & Travel Agents" (p. 214) for tour providers in Laos,

all of which have helpful offices in Vientiane. The *Vientiane Times* (www.vientianetimes.org.la) is the local English-language paper, a fun read with good listings of local events.

Fast Facts Vientiane

American Express Vientiane's Amex representative is **Diethelm Travel**, Namphu Square, Setthathirat Road (✆ **021/213-833**; www.diethelmtravel.com).

ATMs There's a **Banque Pour Le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL)** ATM on Setthathirah Road (across the street from Joma Café), maximum withdrawal is 700,000 kip ($81/£54). The newly opened **Australia New Zealand Bank Vientiane** (ANZV) has two ATMs at their Lang Xang Avenue branch near the Victory Monument (at Blvd. Khounboulan intersection).

Currency Exchange **Banque Pour Le Commerce Extérieur Lao (BCEL)** is on Pangkham Street down by the river, just west of the Lane Xang Hotel (✆ **021/213-200**). At BCEL and most other banks, you can exchange money in all major currencies, change traveler's checks to U.S. dollars, and get cash advances on Visa and MasterCard; commission rates start at 3%. You can also exchange money at **Banque Setthathirat**, near Wat Mixay. All banks are open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 3:30pm. Other banks line Lane Xang Avenue; exchange counters dot the city.

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **991**; for fire, dial ✆ **190**; and for an ambulance, dial ✆ **195**. For medical evacuation, call **Lao Westcoast Helicopter Company** (✆ **021/512-023**).

Internet Access There are numerous Internet cafes on riverside Fa Ngum or on parallel Setthathirat or Samsenthai (each 1 block farther from the river). Connections are generally good. Expect to pay around 100 kip per minute (60¢/35p per hour) at most Internet cafes. **Joma Bakery Café** charges 25,000 kip ($2.90/£1.90) per hour. Hotel business centers charge at least three times this rate. Wireless service has arrived in Vientiane, but the connections are slow and finicky.

Mail The general post office is at the corner of Khou Vieng Road and Lane Xang Avenue, opposite the Morning Market. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to noon and 1 to 5pm, Saturday and Sunday from 8am to noon. EMS and FedEx services are just next door.

Telephones The city code for Vientiane is **21**. The central telephone office, where you can place local and international direct dial (IDD) calls, is located on Setthathirat Road just east of Nam Phu Circle (Nam Phu Fountain). It's open from 8am to 10pm daily. You can also send faxes.

WHERE TO STAY

Vientiane has some good options that range from luxury rooms to backpacker dives. Book ahead, especially in late November and early December, and ask for a discount if you come during the rainy season (some places post their low-season rates). Hotels accept U.S. dollars, Lao kip, or Thai baht. Be warned that the prices listed below do not always include a government tax of 10% or any additional service charges (sometimes applicable in high season).

Expensive

Don Chan Palace ★ "It's on the river. You can't miss it." That's all you need to know to find the Don Chan Palace. While Vientiane has a law banning buildings taller than the seven-story Victory Monument, the 14-story Don Chan brushed aside this inconvenience by being built on an island in the Mekong. Set just south of the city business center (a 15-min. walk or short shuttle-bus ride) and resembling a life-size dollhouse, it really is an awful eyesore. That said, the views of the Mekong and surrounding areas, especially from the rooftop restaurant, are spectacular. With its vast convention hall and extensive business facilities, the Don Chan was clearly designed to cater to the Asian business traveler. Rooms are business-hotel standard, with muted colors and few traditional Lao touches, but they're comfortable nonetheless. The real draw here is the unparalleled views, so ask for a room on the Mekong/sunset side, where you can enjoy the scenery from your own small balcony.

Unit 6 Piawat Village, Sistanak District, Vientiane. ✆ **021/244-288.** Fax 021/244-111. www.donchanpalacelaopdr.com. 229 units. $160–$190 (£107–£127) double; $350–$550 (£233–£367) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and disco; bakery; coffee shop; indoor pool; outdoor gym; spa; sauna; steam room; concierge; travel agency; shuttle-bus service (to city center and airport); business center; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Green Park Boutique Hotel ★★ Combining the traditional and contemporary into a seamless whole can be difficult, but the Green Park has succeeded in doing just that. Raised tile pathways set among jar fountains lead from the elegant reception area to the central courtyard, where contemporary Lao-style pavilions surround a lovely swimming pool and adjacent reflecting pool. Stylish guest rooms boast rich wood floors, beautiful Lao silks draped over chic teakwood furniture, and all the modern conveniences, including free wireless Internet access. Cozy balconies have views of the pools and the newly planted frangipani trees that dot the surrounding garden areas. Set next to the undeveloped Nong Chanh Park, Vientiane's largest, and a 15-minute walk to the Morning Market, the Green Park is far enough away to feel secluded but not too far to feel isolated from the city. Add to this tranquil setting an eager-to-please staff that caters to guests' every whim, and you get a hotel that has set the bar extremely high for future boutique properties in Vientiane.

248 Khouvieng Rd., P.O. Box 9698, Vientiane. ✆ **021/264-097.** Fax 021/263-064. www.greenparkvientiane.com. 34 units. $125–$135 (£83–£90) classic (double standard); $140–$150 (£93–£100) deluxe; $260–$390 (£173–£260) suite. Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; outdoor pool; spa; Jacuzzi; free airport transfers; shuttle service to town; business center; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Lao Plaza Hotel ★ Popular with business travelers, the Lao Plaza is the most familiar international hotel in Laos. It's in a convenient central location, and the accommodations are bland but comfortable. Sizable rooms are either beige or blue, with solid wood furniture, thick rugs, firm beds, and small marble-tile bathrooms with terry-cloth robes. The pool is big and inviting. The May Yuan restaurant has admirable Chinese food, while a cheery cafe has buffet meals and a deli/bakery. The Plaza is sufficiently self-contained and convenient to any destination in town, and one of only a few accommodations in Laos where you might forget that you're in Laos.

63 Samsenthai Rd., P.O. Box 6708, Vientiane. ✆ **021/218-800.** Fax 021/218-808. www.laoplazahotel.com. 142 units. $120–$140 (£80–£93) superior single/twin; $150–$170 (£100–£113) plaza single/twin; $230–$480 (£153–£320) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; popular nightclub; beer garden; bakery; nice pool; gym; Jacuzzi; sauna; travel agency; car service; business center w/Internet access; bookstore

and gift shop; massage; laundry service; conference rooms; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access (Plaza rooms free), minibar, hair dryer, safe.

Novotel Vientiane ★ Just a short ride west of the town center, the Novotel Vientiane is a pleasant oasis from the dusty streets and downtown tuk-tuk clamor. The lobby is decorated in a classic Art Deco theme, with stylish woodwork and a domed ceiling painted in a muted pastel yellow—an attractive invitation to Novotel's fine rooms and services. Renovated executive rooms have fine wood furniture and marble bathrooms. They also come with perks such as free laundry, a minibar, and Internet access. Standard rooms are done in pastels with cane furnishings and plain tile bathrooms. Everything is ultratidy. All units feature hangings and artwork that keep your mind in Indochina. Adjoining the lobby is a well-appointed Continental restaurant with indoor and outdoor by-the-pool seating. The staff is friendly and helpful, and the hotel offers a wealth of facilities and services, including use of its smart business center and chic executive lounge. It's a bit far from town but has very convenient amenities and good transportation. The busy disco, Dtec, is always a happening spot.

Unit 9, Samsenthai Rd., P.O. Box 585, Vientiane. ✆ **800/221-4542** or 021/213-570. Fax 021/213-572. www.novotel.com. 172 units. $90 (£60) standard; $110 (£73) superior; $180 (£120) executive; $450 (£300) executive suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; nice outdoor pool; tennis; health club; sauna; steam bath; free and frequent transport to the town center; business center w/Internet access; gift shop; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, hair dryer, safe.

Settha Palace Hotel ★★ Once the distinguished address for visitors from the adjacent colonies of Indochina, this masterfully restored, early-20th-century French colonial mansion traced a long history of decline before its multimillion-dollar face-lift and 1999 reopening. A small circular drive leads to the columned marble entry, where light coming through the large windows lends a softness to the lobby that is not unlike stepping into a sepia photograph of a distant time. Rooms are cozy, with antique details, dark-wood reproduction furnishings, and stalwart four-poster beds. Bathrooms are small but still have separate showers. If a stay at the Palace is a trip to the past, modern amenities such as in-room Internet access and satellite TV will keep you connected in the present. The hotel's elegant restaurant, La Belle Epoque (p. 229), serves excellent Continental cuisine. With service unmatched in town, the Palace offers quality far exceeding its price tag.

6 Pangkham (P.O. Box 161), Vientiane. ✆ **021/217-581.** Fax 021/217-583. www.setthapalace.com. 29 units. $180 (£120) deluxe; $280 (£187) junior suite; $380 (£253) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool (nonguests welcome for $7.50/£5); Jacuzzi; car service; business center w/Internet access; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, safe.

Moderate

City Inn Vientiane ★★ Finds This brand-new hotel is a stylish option for downtown Vientiane. The decor is minimalist with a touch of traditional Laos. Double rooms are spacious, with unfinished stone floors, cream-colored walls, and contemporary wood furniture. Cool rattan furniture and traditional Lao silk bed throws round out the look, alongside modern comforts such as flatscreen TVs and American standard tubs and sinks. The large lobby has sparkling white floors and Scandinavian-style furniture mixed with dark-wood accents. This is a great place to check into for a few days. Longer stay/serviced apartments are also available.

Pangkham Rd. (across from Days Inn) Lane Xang Ave., P.O. Box 3925, Vientiane. ✆ **021/218-333.** Fax 021/218-444. 40 units. $55 (£37) deluxe; $90–$100 (£60–£67) suite. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; sauna; car rental; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Hotel Beau Rivage Mekong ★★ You found it! The best riverside minihotel in Vientiane. Don't let the pink facade send you running—the Beau Rivage offers fun, colorful accommodations in a picturesque location. Get a room on one of the higher floors for a better view of the Mekong below. Staff is extremely friendly, and unlike other hotels in this price range, employees here speak English very well. My bachelor pad ground-floor room was done in shades of blue, with diamond patterns painted on the walls and ceiling. Floors were matching blue tile with granite pieces leading to the stone bathtub. Oddly, however, bathroom amenities do not include shampoo or conditioner. Corner bathrooms have exposed brick walls. Everything is whimsical without being cheesy or weird. Superior rooms on the third floor are the best choice—they are also painted blue and have excellent views; second floor superiors are a bit too pink for my taste.

Fa Ngum Rd., P.O. Box 9015, Vientiane. ✆ **021/243-350.** Fax 021/243-345. www.hbrm.com. 16 units. High season $47–$57 (£31–£38) double; low season $42–$49 (£28–£33) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; spa; laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi, minibar.

Royal Dokmaideng Hotel ★ The Royal is owned and managed by a Taiwanese group and often fills with big groups and conventioneers. The hotel has large rooms that are devoid of character; many are a bit musty or use too much aerosol to cover it up (ask to see the room first). But the spacious suites are good for families, and the Chinese restaurant is bright and inviting, as is the small courtyard pool. With a central location on Lane Xang Avenue, just north of the Morning Market, the Royal Dokmaideng is a favorite for business travelers. Be sure to ask for a nonsmoking room. There's a popular karaoke area on the second floor.

Lane Xang Ave., P.O. Box 3925, Vientiane. ✆ **021/214-455.** Fax 021/214-454. 80 units. $45 (£30) double; $80 (£53) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small courtyard pool; basic gym; sauna; laundry service; conference room; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Tai-Pan Hotel ★ Value This very attractive midsize hotel is convenient to downtown, on a quiet street just off the Mekong, and offers the amenities and service of its larger, high-end competition. It's starting to show its age, but the outdoor pool is a big draw. Standard rooms are compact, with double beds only, while the deluxe rooms are spacious. All are cheerful, with dark parquet floors and painted wood furniture set against bright yellow walls and floral bedspreads. Sizable bathrooms are done in blinding white, with clean tile and tubs. Ask for a third-floor room with a balcony and river view. With a sister property in Bangkok, the Tai-Pan is popular for business travelers and the long-staying humanitarian workers.

2–12 François Nginn Rd., Ban Mixay, Muong Chanthabury, Vientiane. ✆ **021/216-906.** Fax 021/216-223. www.taipanhotel-vientiane.com. 42 units. $82 (£55) double; $88 (£59) deluxe; $99 (£66) junior suite; $112–$148 (£75–£99) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small pool; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; airport transfer; conference rooms; computer rental; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Inexpensive

Avalon Hotel ★ Value This brand-new minihotel is the best option in this price range. It's about 2 blocks away from the main tourist drag, which is a good thing or a bad thing depending on your love/tolerance of loud music and chatty travelers. Double rooms are nice, but the corner twins are worth the upgrade—they're bigger and have better views. Each room is named for a flower, and quotations offering pearls of wisdom are pasted to the walls or fridges. Staff are eager to please; some have excellent English, and others get an A for effort.

Phnom Penh Rd., Ban Anou, Vientiane. ✆ **021/263-597.** Fax 021/263-596. www.avalonbooking.com. 30 units. $30–$35 (£20–£23) double/twin; $65 (£43) suite. Internet rates available. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, fridge (not available in single rooms).

Day Inn Hotel ★ (Finds) This charming little inn in the shadow of the Lao Plaza was once the Indian embassy, and it retains some of that urban, colonial dignity in its large, airy rooms, with their high ceilings and tall French doors. Though it's all a bit simple, and the bright sea-green color scheme is a little overpowering, you're in an ideal downtown location. Rooms (with orange, blue, or pink walls) are furnished in basic but tidy wicker, with hard beds and clean bathrooms (some with a tub). The Day Inn is like an upscale guesthouse, really, but it has the standard in-room amenities of a proper hotel. Ask for a room in the front, where doors and windows open to small private balconies. The staff is extremely cheerful and very helpful, making this an all-around pleasant stay.

059/3 Pangkham Rd., P.O. Box 4083, Vientiane. ✆ **021/223-848.** Fax 021/222-984. dayinn@laopdr.com. 30 units. $40–$45 (£27–£30) double/twin; $55 (£37) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; laundry service; Internet access in lobby. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, safe.

Vayakorn Guesthouse ★ (Value) This is one of the better deals in town. "Guesthouse" is a misnomer for this place, which is centrally located and offers nicer digs than many of the more expensive hotels in town. Clean, comfortable rooms come with wood floors, soft beds, and spotless shower-only bathrooms. Amenities, as well as views, are almost nonexistent, but you can't complain at these prices. A deal like this is difficult to keep hush-hush and the word has been out for a while, so be sure to book ahead.

091 Nokeo Koummane St., Ban Mixay, Vientiane. ✆ **021/241-911.** vayakone@laotel.com. 21 units. $25 (£17) double/twin. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (breakfast only); laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV.

WHERE TO DINE

French is very big in the Lao capital, and good international restaurants of this ilk actually outnumber those serving Lao fare. You'll find some great, affordable fine dining. A few local specialties to watch out for are *khao poun*, rice vermicelli with vegetables, meat, or chiles, in coconut milk; *laap*, minced meat, chicken, or fish tossed with fresh mint leaves; or a tasty Lao-style pâté. Try sticky rice, eaten with the hands, as an accompaniment to most Lao dishes (it's a thrice-a-day staple for Laotians).

Expensive

La Belle Epoque ★★ FRENCH/CONTINENTAL In the atmospheric Settha Palace Hotel (p. 227), you can't beat the atmosphere of La Belle Epoque—colonial elegance mixed with Vientiane's laid-back charm. The service is efficient, and the menu covers a wide range of Continental specialties, with meat, game, and seafood prepared to order. Imported Australian steaks and salmon top a fine list of specialties, such as grilled lamb with ratatouille or terrine of duck liver marinated in wine. Try one of the creative appetizers, such as the goat-cheese pastry. Don't pass up the crème brûlée. You would pay an arm and a leg for such a meal anywhere but here. The Sunday poolside buffet brunch (11am–2pm) is a steal at $18 (£12); price includes pool admission.

Settha Palace Hotel, 6 Pangkham St. ✆ **021/217-581.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $7.50–$25 (£5–£17). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Le Nadao ★★ FRENCH Once a little-known eatery of just a few tables, where ordering a soufflé meant a long, languid wait, Le Nadao's Lao-born and French-trained

chef and owner, Mr. Sayavouth, is reaching a wider market at his larger location adjacent to the Patuxay Monument, Vientiane's Arc de Triomphe. Le Nadao means "Stars in the Ricefield," and indeed this little star now plays host to Vientiane's best and brightest business folks and dignitaries. The dining room is a converted teak house, very rustic and soothing, with a corrugated metal ceiling showing through rough slats, warm indirect lighting, and live local music. The menu is classic French: no fusion, no foolin'. You might start with calamari pan-fried in cream Catalonian style, followed by roast partridge in a rich gravy with potatoes and a lightly fried Mekong filet with lemon, capers, and local organic brown rice. Dessert is chocolate mousse—so rich you'll melt—or a unique "tulip" of pastry with local fruit and ice cream. Bring someone special and make a long evening of it.

Patouxay (on the west side of the Victory Monument roundabout). ✆ **021/213-174.** Main courses $4–$30 (£2.65–£20). MC, V. Daily noon–1:30pm and 7–10:30pm.

L'Opera ★★ ITALIAN For more than 10 years, L'Opera has been serving "real Italian" cuisine and garnering nothing but praise. It features homemade egg-noodle pasta, fine grilled and broiled entrees, daily specials, and fantastic desserts and espresso. There is also a large selection of pizza Lao, which is a surprisingly good combination of tomatoes, cheese, chiles, Lao sausage, and pineapple. The ambience is a rather formal Italy-meets-Lao, with linen tablecloths, brick walls, and wood-beam ceilings in a large, open setting. Lao staff in fine restaurants often act as if their foreign patrons are armed and dangerous, but here the service is confident and professional. Groups of four or more can try the Opera Menu of nine different special appetizers, pastas, and main courses for $25 (£17) per person.

On the Fountain Circle. ✆ **021/215-099.** Main courses $6–$18 (£4–£12). AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6–10pm.

Moderate

Amphone ★ LAO This is one of my favorite restaurants in Vientiane: It's affordable, sticks to classic Laos fare (there's not a dinner knife in site), and offers a decent wine selection. A major bonus is the menu's proper explanations of Lao dishes—no guessing around with funny English translations. The outdoor courtyard is an elegant, inviting space with wooden floors, dim lighting, and jazz music piped through the speakers. Order a tasting menu for a quick introduction to Lao cuisine, otherwise I recommend the Mak P—a savory white fish steamed in a banana leaf—and sticky rice. You can't go wrong.

37 Ban Xieng Gneun (located on the small alley beside Jazzy Brick). ✆ **020/771-1138.** Main courses 28,000 kip–40,000 kip ($3.25–$4.65/£2.15–£3.10). No credit cards. Daily noon–2pm and 6–10pm.

Full Moon Café ★ INTERNATIONAL Boasting Lao, Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indian daily specials, this is the place to go if you're not sure which Asian country's cuisine you want to sample. Other places stretch themselves thin through too much variety, but the Full Moon covers all the culinary bases pretty well. The main menu is a mix of tasty Western and Thai staples, while the tapas menu offers a few interesting selections, most notably the "Water Buffalo Wings" and "Pig Between the Sheets." Of course, if I see "Pig Between the Sheets" on a menu, I'm going to order it. And of course, this being Laos, it wasn't quite what I expected (it was a little like French toast), but it was good nonetheless. If you're simply looking for a place to beat the heat, order a frappe/cappu/mocha-cino, sink into one of the oversize cushions lining the dining area, and relax.

020 François Nginn Rd. (across from the Tai-Pan Hotel). ✆ **021/243-373.** Main courses 23,000 kip–42,000 kip ($2.70–$4.90/£2.65–£3.25). MC, V. Mon–Sat 9am–midnight (kitchen closes at 10:30pm).

Khop Chai Deu ★ LAO/INTERNATIONAL The name means "Thank you very much." No matter how short your stay in Vientiane, you can't miss this place even if you want to. Just south and west of the Nam Phu Fountain and set in a large colonial building, Khop Chai Deu is the crossroads for expats, backpackers, and tourists. Folks come to get connected with the local scene as much as anything. The menu is extensive, with some tasty barbecue and good Lao selections. Consider the Lao Discovery set, which walks you through various short courses of typical Lao dishes. Asian standbys of fried rice, noodles, and spring rolls are on the menu, as are Western fare including pizza, spaghetti, and other microwavable favorites from home. Sit on one of the many balconies of this multitiered building, pull up a chair in the courtyard or at the bar, get into some NGO shoptalk, or share notes with English teachers and backpackers. Khop Chai Deu is abuzz late into the evening, and the 8,000 kip (90¢/60p) draft beer flows freely.

54 Setthathirat Rd., southwest of Nam Phu Fountain. ✆ **021/251-564.** Main courses 14,000 kip–43,000 kip ($1.65–$5/£1.10–£3.30); set menu 69,000 kip ($8/£5.30). MC, V. Daily 7am–10:30pm. Bar open later.

Kua Lao ★★ LAO Kua Lao serves excellent Lao fare in a traditional atmosphere that makes for a unique dining experience. This restaurants, set in a restored colonial mansion, offers music and Lao dancing each evening. It's a bit of tourist kitsch, but the staff is very kind, and their desire to infuse your dining experience with Lao culture is quite genuine. Nowhere else will you find such an extensive menu of Lao food with English descriptions (and pictures), and many will appreciate the numerous options for vegetarians, not to mention a whole page of tempting Lao desserts. Try the *laap* (or *larp*), a mince of fish, chicken, or beef mixed with spices and mint; it's excellent when accompanied by a basket of sticky rice and eaten by hand. The set menus are a bargain at $10 (£6.65), especially for smaller groups hoping to sample a larger selection. If you're going upcountry or heading out to the boondocks, this is a good place for a primer on Lao cuisine.

111 Samsenthai Rd. (at the intersection with Chanta Khoumane). ✆ **021/214-813.** Main courses $2–$6 (£1.30–£4); set menu $10 (£6.65). MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 5–11:30pm.

Le Central ★★ FRENCH/CONTINENTAL This is an elegant yet casual addition to the growing stable of French fine-dining options in Vientiane. Le Central scored a coup by stealing one of the chefs from La Belle Epoque. His new twists on Asian favorites (deep-fried spring roll filled with goat cheese and cashew nuts) and a nice selection of French and Chilean wines complement the Continental main menu. The aforementioned spring rolls are excellent; the braised lamb shank is melt-in-your-mouth tender. However, the highlight of the meal will undoubtedly be the Chef's Specialty: chocolate volcano cake with custard and gingerbread ice cream. Outstanding. Even if you eat dinner somewhere else, the freshly baked cakes and pies are worth a look for dessert.

077/8 Setthathirat Rd. ✆ **021/243-703.** Main courses $5.50–$28 (£3.65–£19). MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6:30–10pm.

Le Silapa ★★ Finds FRENCH/CONTINENTAL For cozy atmosphere and authentic French cuisine, this is a find in Vientiane (if you can find it). The effusive French proprietor will make you feel welcome. There's a great wine list to go with tasty meals such as whitefish subtly garnished with capers, lemon, and parsley. The food is a lot more sophisticated than you might expect from such an unassuming storefront.

17/1 Sihom Rd., Ban Haysok. ✆ **021/219-689.** Main courses $8.50–$19 (£5.65–£13); set lunch $8 (£5.30). MC, V. Mon–Sat 11:30am–2pm and 6–10pm.

The Spirit House ★★ Finds INTERNATIONAL Resident expats are fond of this riverside restaurant, and local Laotians drop in for late-hour drinks. Spirit House is on

Finds Vientiane's Street Fare

The busy area of **Ban Haysok** on the western edge of the town center is Vientiane's small **Chinatown** and an excellent place for an evening stroll and some great snacks. One-dish meals of rice or noodles, Lao/Chinese desserts, and super-sweet banana pancakes are sold by street vendors. It's an area that stays up late for sleepy Vientiane, and its charm is in the clamorous chaos. Don't miss it.

The many storefronts along riverside **Fa Ngum Road** are popular gathering spots for travelers, and across the street, on the riverside, are a row of thatched-roof eateries serving all the basics. This is a great spot for viewing the Mekong and neighboring Thailand at sunset.

Fa Ngum Road, but located a comfortable distance away from the din of the backpacker district. Hearty food such as meat pies, sandwiches, and pastas fill the menu. My beef and beer pie was a bit on the dry side, but the gravy was top notch and the potato wedges, crinkle cut for extra crispiness, were the real deal. Bartenders whip up lovely drinks and cocktails; the Firenze Martini (Gordon's gin, Campari bitter orange, and rosso vermouth) packs a sweet kick.

9/105 Fa Ngum Rd. ✆ **021/243-795.** Main courses 17,000 kip–55,000 kip ($1.95–$6.35/£1.30–£4.25). MC, V. Daily 7am–11:30pm.

Sticky Fingers ★★ INTERNATIONAL Started by Australians who came to Laos with the U.N. and are involved in NGO work, Sticky Fingers serves soups, salads, sandwiches, and snacks in a relaxed atmosphere. It's got the corner on the casual business lunch and the after-work crowd. Try a burger, sandwich, or steak, and be sure to choose from the impressive list of homemade dips and sauces (available for carryout). This is the place to grab a falafel or get your hummus fix and a respite from the afternoon heat.

10/3 François Nginn Rd., across from the Tai-Pan Hotel. ✆ **021/215-972.** Main courses 22,000 kip–68,000 kip ($2.55–$7.85/£1.70–£5.25). No credit cards. Tues–Sun 10am–11pm.

Inexpensive

Nazim Restaurant ★ INDIAN For great Indian cuisine at affordable prices, Nazim has cornered the market in Laos and now has branch locations in Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. Serving everything from *biryani* to any kind of curry you can imagine, Nazim offers a survey of Indian cuisine (and the beer to go with it) in a no-frills storefront along the Mekong. The staff can sometimes act as if taking your order is an unspeakable bother, but the food is tasty and the prices are reasonable, making this a popular backpacker spot and an expat standby.

Fa Ngum Rd. ✆ **021/223-480.** www.nazim.laopdr.com. Main courses 12,000 kip–30,000 kip ($1.40–$3.50/90p–£2.30). No credit cards. Daily 10:30am–10:30pm.

Snacks & Cafes

Joma Bakery Café, across from the fountain on Setthathirat Road (✆ **021/215-265**), is renovated and spruced up, with fine breads and good coffee, as well as wireless Internet access. Next door is the newly opened **Dao-Fa** (✆ **021/215-651**), offering the same fine crepes and pastas as its sister branch in Luang Prabang. Nice toasted baguette sandwiches can be had at **Le Banneton** (Nokeokumman Rd.; ✆ **021/217-321**). The **Scandinavian**

Bakery (✆ **021/215-199**), off Nam Phu Fountain Circle, has good fresh bread and is always packed with travelers. It's a good place to pick up a foreign newspaper and people-watch on the terrace. The **Swedish Bakehouse** (74/1 Phangkham Rd.; ✆ **021/215-231**) is another tasty European option that also serves decent pizza. **Xayoh Café**, just across from the Lao National Culture Hall (✆ **020/612-051**), serves pub grub of all sorts and is a good place to relax and have a beer or a coffee anytime. For excellent desserts, including a chocolate and wine sampler, try **Le Central** (see above).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Most sights are within the city limits, which means you'll be able to cover them by bicycle or even on foot, getting to know the city intimately—and getting to know the city intimately might be the real attraction in this little burg.

Buddha Park ★★ Finds Kids It's said that if a fool persists in his folly, he will become wise. Buddha Park is a fanciful sculpture garden full of Hindu and Buddhist statues, and it is a concrete testament to the obsession of Luang Pu, a shamanist priest who conceived and started building the park in the 1950s. The statues are captivating, whether they are snarling, reposing, or saving maidens in distress (or carrying them to their doom—it's hard to tell). The huge reclining Buddha is outstanding; you can climb on his arm for a photo. There is also a large pumpkin-esque dome to climb, itself filled with sculptures. The dusty and bumpy bus ride here provides clear views of Thailand across the Mekong.

About 24km (15 miles) southeast of town (take bus no. 14 from the Morning Market). Admission 5,000 kip (55¢/40p), plus an additional 2,000 kip (25¢/15p) for jumbo parking and 2,000 kip (25¢/15p) to use a camera. Daily 7:30am–5:30pm.

Ho Phra Keo ★★ Built by King Setthathirat in 1565, Phra Keo was constructed to house an emerald Buddha that the king took from Thailand (which the Thais took back in 1779). Today there are no monks in residence, and the *wat* is actually a museum of religious art, including a Khmer stone Buddha and a wooden copy of the famous Luang Prabang Buddha. In the garden, there's a transplanted jar from the Plain of Jars (p. 256).

On Setthathirat Rd., opposite Wat Si Saket. Admission 5,000 kip (60¢/35p). Daily 8am–noon and 1–4pm.

Lao National Museum Housed in an interesting old colonial structure that was once used for government offices, the museum highlights the revolution of the 1970s with photos, artifacts, and re-creations of the Lao struggle for independence against the French and Americans. The exhibits (firearms, chairs used by national heroes, and the like) are rather scanty, barely scratching the surface of such a complicated subject, but most are in English at least. Archaeological finds and maps presented on the first floor (probably because there is no other museum to house them at present) help make a visit here worthwhile. One of the most interesting exhibits is in the last room before you exit, sort of a Laos trade and commodities exhibit of produce, handiwork, and manufactured goods. Though dated, it will give you some idea of Laos's geography and commerce.

Samsenthai Rd., near the Lao Plaza Hotel. Admission 10,000 kip ($1.15/75p). Daily 8am–noon and 1–4pm.

Morning Market (Talat Sao) ★★ Full of surprises around every corner, the Morning Market is the hub of local commerce and really where the action is. Here you can find anything from the Thai version of a Britney Spears CD to a Buddhist keepsake from one of the tourist shops or trinket salesmen. Great deals can be found on Lao silks if you

bargain hard. This is the Laos version of mall culture, and sometimes the everyday tool department or stationery area gives a special glimpse into daily life. Enjoy a good wander and hassle-free shopping. There are few touts, but, as always in crowded places, mind your valuables.

On Talat Sao Rd., off Lane Xang Ave. Daily 8am–5pm.

Patuxay (Victory Monument) ★ This monument was completed in 1968 and dedicated to those who fought in the war of independence against the French. Ironically, the monument is an arch modeled on the Parisian Arc de Triomphe. Its detailing is typically Lao, however, with many *kinnari* figures—half woman, half bird. It's an imposing sight, and you can climb up for a good city view. Once on top, numerous signs forbid the use of cameras (government paranoia, perhaps), but no one seems to take heed. This is the town's main teenage strutting ground and is crowded on weekends.

At the end of Lane Xang Ave. Admission 3,000 kip (35¢/20p). Daily 8am–4pm.

Phra That Luang ★★ This is the preeminent stupa in Laos, a national symbol that's an imposing 44m (144 ft.) high. It is not the original; the first, built in 1566 by King Setthathirat over the ruins of a 12th-century Khmer temple, was destroyed when the Siamese sacked Vientiane in 1828. It was rebuilt by the French in 1900, but the Lao people criticized it as not being true to the original. It was torn down in 1930 and remodeled to become what you see today. As you approach, the statue in front depicts Setthathirat. After you enter the first courtyard, look to the left to see a sacred Bodhi tree, the same variety Buddha was sitting under when he achieved enlightenment. It has a tall, slim trunk, and the shape of its foliage is almost perfectly round. According to the Laotians, Bodhi trees appear only in sacred places; legend has it that the site originally housed a stupa containing a piece of the Buddha's breastbone. The stupa is built in stages. On the second level, there are 30 small stupas, representing the 30 Buddhist perfections, or stages to enlightenment. That Luang is the site of one of Laos's most important temple festivals, which takes place in early November.

At the end of That Luang Rd. Admission 5,000 kip (55¢/40p). Daily 8am–noon and 1–4pm.

That Dam (Black Stupa) This ancient stupa was probably constructed in the 15th century or even earlier, though it has never been dated. It is rumored to be the resting place of a mighty seven-headed *naga*, or dragon, that protected the local residents during the Thai invasion in the early 1800s. (***Note:*** The name is pronounced *tat dahm*, not with the mildly invective intonation.)

In the center of the traffic circle at the intersection of Chanta Khumman and Bartholomie Rd.

Wat Ong Teu ★ Wat Ong Teu is in a particularly auspicious location, surrounded by four temples: Wat Inpeng to the north, Wat Mixay to the south, Wat Haysok to the east, and Wat Chan to the west. Its name comes from its most famous inhabitant, a huge (*ongteu*) bronze Buddha. The temple, famous for its beautifully carved wooden facade, was built in the early 16th century and rebuilt in the 19th and 20th centuries. Home to the Patriarch of Lao Buddhism, the temple also serves as a national center for Buddhist studies.

Intersection of Setthathirat and Chau Anou roads. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Si Muang Another 1566 Setthathirat creation, this *wat* houses the foundation pillar of the city. According to legend, a pregnant woman named Nang Si, inspired by the gods to sacrifice herself, jumped into the pit right before the stone was lowered. She

Health & a Spa

The **Lao Plaza Hotel** (✆ **021/218-800**) has a basic gym and good outdoor pool open to day visitors. Settha Palace's outdoor pool also offers day rates. There are a number of small massage storefronts along Fa Ngum Road, but for good spa treatments, try **Papaya Spa** (✆ **021/216-550**; www.papayaspa.com), a Vientiane trendsetter.

has now become a sort of patron saint for the city. The temple is very popular as a result and is the site of a colorful procession 2 days before the That Luang festival every November.

East on Samsenthai, near where it joins Setthathirat. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Si Saket ★★ Completed in 1818, Wat Si Saket was the only temple in Vientiane to survive the pillaging of the city by the Siamese in 1828, perhaps because the temple was built in traditional Thai style. It is renowned for the more than 10,000 Buddha images, of all shapes and sizes, in every possible nook and cranny. Look for Buddha characteristics that are unique to Laos: the standing or "praying for rain" Buddha; or the pose with arms up and palms facing forward, the "stop fighting" or "calling for peace" Buddha. The pose in which Buddha points the right hand downward signifies a rejection of evil and a calling to mother earth for wisdom and assistance. Lao Buddhas also have exaggerated nipples and square noses, to emphasize that Buddha is no longer human. The *sim* (chapel or ordination hall) features a Khmer-style Buddha seated on a coiled cobra for protection.

At the corner of Setthathirat Rd. and Lane Xang Ave. Admission 5,000 kip (55¢/40p). Daily 8am–noon and 1–4pm.

SHOPPING

Laos is famous for its hand-woven silk textiles. You can buy them as fabric or in ready-made wall hangings, accessories, and clothing. Finely crafted silver and ornamental objects are also popular souvenirs. The main shopping streets are **Samsenthai** and **Setthathirat**, around the Nam Phu Fountain area and the **Morning Market** (p. 233), where you can find the best deals on Lao silks.

Perhaps best known (not just in town but worldwide) is **Carol Cassidy: Lao Textiles**, off Setthathirat on Nokeo Koummane Road (✆ **021/212-123**; www.laotextiles.com). Since 1990, Carol has employed local weavers who create fine contemporary pieces, using traditional Lao motifs as a base. The colonial house alone is worth a visit, and be sure to stroll through the busy workshop area where up to 10 weavers work the looms and are happy to chat.

Satri Lao Silk, at 79/4 Setthathirat Rd., has fabrics, clothing, and housewares. **Couleur d'Asie**, Namphu Square (✆ **021/223-008**), has a finer ready-to-wear line. The unusual furniture and artworks displayed at **T'shop Lai Gallery**, Vat Inpeng Road (✆ **021/223-178**), are also worth a visit. And the **Mixay Boutic**, Ban Mixay (✆ **021/216-592**), sells a host of silks, clothing, and souvenirs from its two shops in the town center. You can also watch the looms at work in the weaving studio.

For a unique shopping experience in Vientiane, contact Sandra Yuck at her private studio, **Caruso**, housed in a charming colonial property west of the hospital on Fa Ngum

Road (✆ **021/223-644;** www.carusolao.com). Sandra carries a line of ebony wood boxes, trays, and accessories, as well as unique Lao bedspreads.

Monument Books, 124/1 Nokeokumman Rd. (✆ **021/243-708**), next door to the Vayakorn Guesthouse, has the best selection of guidebooks, novels, and newspapers. For foreign goods, check out **Phimphone Minimart**, 110/1 Samsenthai Rd. (✆ **021/219-045**), or the **AM Minimart**, on Lane Xang Avenue, just past the Morning Market.

VIENTIANE AFTER DARK

At dusk, wander down to the riverside quay on Fa Ngum Road. The **Lane Xang Sunset Cruise** (✆ **020/771-1003**) boards at 7pm and includes meals from $8 (£5.30) and affordable drinks. Passage is free, and the cruise lasts about an hour and a half.

Back on land, there are a few places to meet and greet. The **Khop Chai Deu** (p. 231), on the southwest corner of the Nam Phu Fountain, is the hot spot for expats and travelers, and a good place to find out what's going on in town. For a more laid-back atmosphere, try **Jazzy Brick** (43/1 Ban Xieng; ✆ **020/771-1138**), across from Khop Chai Deu, or the **Chicago Bar**, on Rue Nokeokumman across from Wat Mixay. If dancing is your thing, check out **Dtec Disco** at the Novotel hotel. Locals and expats mingle in equal numbers at **Bor Pen Yang** (✆ **021/216-373**) on Fam Ngu Road, a rooftop bar with pool tables and cheap beer. For a proper cocktail and a view of the Mekong, head to the **Spirit House** (Fam Ngu Rd.; ✆ **021/243-795**) next to Hotel Beau Rivage. For live music, try Chess Café, on Sakkaline Road, just off Fa Ngum Road east of town, or **On the Rock**, an intimate affair on the corner of Fa Ngum and Manthatulat Road.

5 VANG VIENG ★

When you arrive in Vang Vieng, a visually unappealing town, you'll be faced with a choice: fight or flight. Resist the urge to flee. Fight through the central backpacker ghetto, with its guesthouse restaurants blasting *Friends* DVDs on a constant, mind-numbing loop, and make your way to the Nam Song River and the breathtaking karst peaks beyond. The surrounding natural beauty more than makes up for the appearance of the town itself, and a few days spent exploring caves, kayaking, trekking, or just sitting at a riverside bar and enjoying a cocktail while admiring the scenery (a personal favorite) is highly recommended. If you're traveling by car, Ngam Ngum dam and lake, some 85km (53 miles) north of Vientiane, is a good stop along the way.

GETTING THERE

Vang Vieng is a smooth 3-hour bus ride north on Hwy. 13 from Vientiane. There are numerous daily departures from the **Morning Market** (✆ **021/216-507**), and tickets are 57,000 kip ($6.60/£4.40) on a VIP bus and 90,000 kip ($11/£6.95) on a minibus. Bus connection to Luang Prabang is a popular option, a bumpy but scenic 6-hour ride for just 105,000 kip ($12/£8.10). However, attacks just north of town mean that road travel must be undertaken with caution. Ask around about the current situation, and do not be surprised if there is a bus-company employee toting a machine gun on board.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Diethelm Travel (see "Planning Your Trip to Laos," p. 213) includes Vang Vieng in many of its tours and can make any custom arrangements. The town itself is brimming with

small operators. For good ecotours, contact the local branch of **Green Discovery** (see "Outdoor Activities," below). 237

WHERE TO STAY

Ban Sabai Bungalow This quiet collection of riverside bungalows, owned by the same folks who run the Xayoh Café and Green Discovery tours, provides a real lesson in the Lao language. *Ban* means "house"; *sabai* means "calm and relaxed"; and you'll pick up words such as *ngiep* ("quiet") and *baw mi banha* ("no problem") if you stay long enough. Rooms are simple, rustic, but clean bungalows. One bungalow abuts the river, while the others form a quiet courtyard area. The riverside restaurant is tops.

Ban Sysavang (along the river just south and west of the town center). ✆ **023/511-088.** 13 units. $28 (£19) standard; $30 (£20) double; $34 (£23) deluxe. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

Bungalow Thavansouk ★ In this prime riverside spot, you'll find a range of neatly fitted, affordable bungalows. Accommodations start at basic guesthouse standards and go all the way up to a unique riverside suite with—get this—a picture window next to the bathtub with views of the river. Rooms vary in age, quality, and mildew smell, so ask to have a peek before checking in. Lounge chairs on the lawn face the breathtaking wall of karst peaks across the river. Riverside rooms here have better views than those at Ban Sabai Bungalow (see above). The attached Sunset restaurant and bar serves good local fare and is a happening spot at dusk.

Ban Sysavang (along the Nam Song just south and west of the town center). ✆ **023/511-096.** Fax 023/511-215. www.thavonsouk.com. 44 units. High season $25 (£17) garden view, $45 (£30) river view, $55–$75 (£37–£50) traditional Lao house; low season $20–$70 (£13–£47). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; concierge can arrange tours and all rentals; business center w/Internet access; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar (not available in garden-view rooms).

The Elephant Crossing Hotel ★★ The Elephant Crossing, run by a Laotian/Australian couple, is your best option in Vang Vieng. The hotel boasts friendly staff, fantastic views of the karsts, and spotless mildew-scent-free rooms. Standard rooms are the popular option for their views from the top two floors of the hotel. The decision to place deluxe rooms on the lower floors was based on weight—they have cozy, if heavy, bathtubs with sliding doors so you can enjoy the view while having a soak. A leisurely repast at the riverside restaurant is a fantastic way to start and/or end the day.

Ban Viengkeo (along the Nam Song, next door to Ban Sabai Bungalows). ✆ **023/511-232.** Fax 023/511-232. www.theelephantcrossinghotel.com. 31 units. $45–$50 (£30–£33) double; $80 (£53) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge can arrange tours; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Vansana Vangvieng Hotel ★ The inviting outdoor pool (nonguests can use it for a 20,000 kip/$2.30/£1.55 fee) is what sets this place apart from the other riverside hotels. Stick with the doubles, as the suites are just standards with a couch. Rooms have wood floors and a few Lao fabrics for color. The restaurant is right on the river and is a great place to have a drink and watch the sunset.

Ban Sysavang (along the Nam Song just south and west of the town center). ✆ **023/511-598.** Fax 023/511-600. www.vansanahotel-group.com. 38 units. 300,000 kip–500,000 kip ($35–$58/£23–£39) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; business center; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV.

WHERE TO DINE

There are lots of small eateries of the storefront variety all over town, and you can get decent, basic travelers' fare (fried noodles, rice, and faux-Western food) for next to nothing.

Sanaxay, on the main drag (✆ **023/511-440**), draws crowds with its cozy lounge seats and Lao, Thai, and Western menu. Nearby **Nazim Restaurant**, 15 Ban Sansavang (✆ **023/511-214**), serves the same good, affordable Indian cuisine as its other locations in Laos. Xayoh Café, at the main intersection in town (✆ **023/511-403**), serves reliable burgers and basics. For Lao fare, try Nokeo, across from the old market (✆ **020/2411203**), or **Phay Kam**, on the west side of the old airstrip (✆ **023/511-095**), a locals' favorite.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Ecotour operators offering kayak tours now line the main road, but the folks at **Green Discovery**, at the main intersection in town (Setthathirat Rd.; ✆ **023/511-440**; www.greendiscoverylaos.com), are your best bet for a fun day in inflatable two-person kayaks on the small rapids of the Nam Song. The trip will take you to some of the local caves, including one where you'll actually swim, wearing a headlamp. A more relaxing option is to spend a half-day tubing down the river. This is by far the most popular activity in Vang Vieng. Transportation is provided upriver—all you have to do is let the current bring you back to town. Another good half-day excursion is a visit to **Phu Kham Cave**, located about 7km (4 1/3 miles) from town. Best reached by bicycle, the cave contains a bronze reclining Buddha as well as a swimming hole out front where you can cool down after the journey. The scenery along the way is spectacular.

6 LUANG PRABANG ★★★

Many a traveler's tale in Luang Prabang begins like this: "Well, I was only supposed to stay here for a couple days, but . . ." The quiet street-side cafes, ancient temples, and laid-back, friendly locals give this town a tranquillity that has sucked many unsuspecting visitors in for weeks (or years) at a time. A visit here feels like a vacation from your vacation.

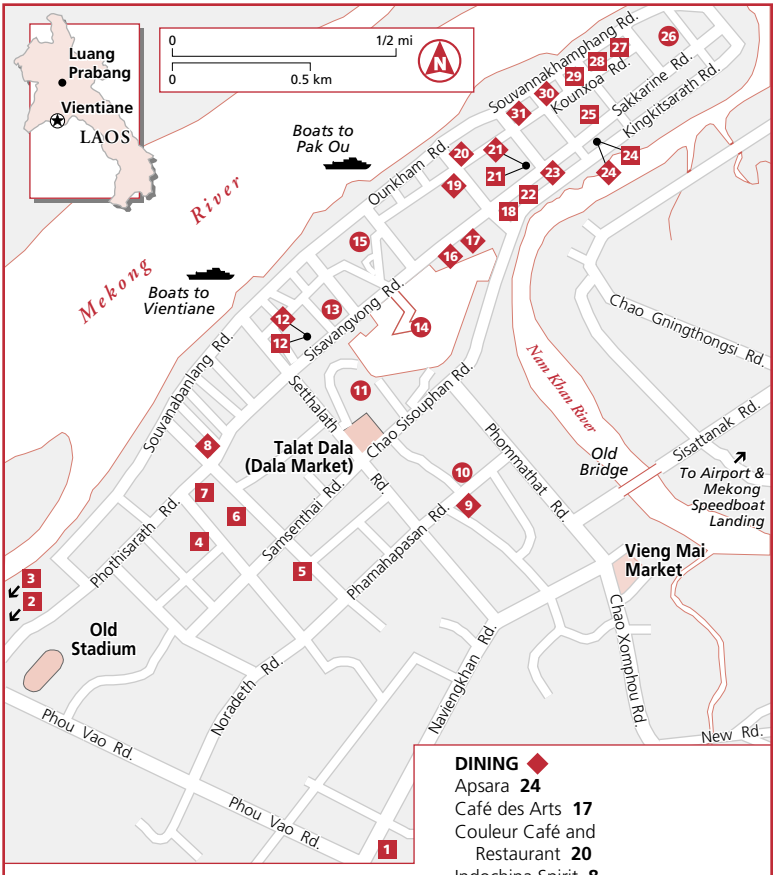
Start your day at dawn, when the temple drums break the early morning silence and saffron-clad monks walk the misty streets to receive rice from the townspeople for their daily meal. Buddhists believe that by giving rice in this life ("making merit"), they are ensuring that they will not go hungry in their next life. Tourists can also participate in this ancient tradition, but should understand that although it has become an attraction of sorts, it is still a sacred ritual.

The rest of the day can be spent seeing the sights or relaxing and soaking in the atmosphere. The town itself is the main attraction, though, and the time worn streets will undoubtedly reveal hidden gems and memorable encounters, whether it's a store selling the perfect antique or a temple housing monks anxious to practice their English.

Although UNESCO's designation of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site in 1995 raised the town's international profile and contributed to a mass influx of tourists, the designation also means that the town's growth will be managed and will hopefully retain its charm for years to come.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Lao Airlines** (✆ **021/212-057**, or 021/214-427 for reservations; www.laoairlines.com) has daily flights from Vientiane to Luang Prabang for $76 (£51) one-way. Two flights weekly connect Luang Prabang with Xieng Khouang ($76/£51) and Pakse ($150/£100). There are no direct flights to the far north; for that, you'll need to fly directly from Vientiane.



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The **Luang Prabang International Airport** handles international flights from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Hanoi, and Siem Reap. On Lao Airlines, the cost is $150 (£100) to Bangkok, $120 (£80) to Chiang Mai, $135 (£90) to Hanoi, and $195 (£130) to Siem Reap. On Thai Air, Chiang Mai flights are $85 (£57). Visas are available on arrival at the airport. Airport transport is best arranged through any hotel. Otherwise, hop a shared, three-wheeled jumbo for $1 (65p) or so.

BY BUS/MINIVAN The overland route to Luang Prabang from Vientiane takes about 6 hours by public bus, assuming there are no difficulties (breakdowns are common). There are international warnings about travel on this stretch, and though it has been quiet in recent years, you should ask around before hitting the road. The trip is bumpy and winding, and local buses are often packed. However, the jaw-dropping scenery, past the mountains and limestone formations at Vang Vieng and several Hmong hill villages, is well worth it. The bus costs 150,000 kip ($18/£12) and has a few morning departures from Vientiane's Northern Bus Station. Go early to get a seat. Luang Prabang's NaLuang (Southern) Bus Station is a 10,000 kip ($1.15/75p) per person shared tuk-tuk ride from the town center. There are also daily connections to Phonsavan (90,000 kip/$11/£6.95) and the far north.

BY CAR/JEEP The mountain route by rented vehicle takes 7 hours and costs about $450 (£300), plus 600,000 kip ($70/£46) per day, *plus* extra for the driver's meals and accommodations. If it seems steep, blame all the NGOs operating in Laos for driving up the prices—they all get reimbursed from expense accounts (in case you were wondering where your charity money ends up).

BY BOAT Boat travel to and from Luang Prabang is quite popular. The local boat (called the **slow boat**) from Houayxay (near the Thai border) departs for Luang Prabang every morning. Arrive early at the riverside quay. The trip costs 120,000 kip ($14/£9.25) and takes about 1 1/2 days to complete. You'll stay overnight in Pak Beng, a village with basic accommodations, before arriving in Luang Prabang on the afternoon of the next day (assuming no engine trouble or other delays). Be prepared for all kinds of discomfort, though you'll have many tales to tell afterward. The chug upriver from Luang Prabang takes up to 3 days and is not recommended.

Speedboats also connect Luang Prabang with Houayxay if they get enough passengers to make the trip worthwhile (contact the main port at ✆ **021/215-924**). Speedboat travel is uncomfortable, noisy, and dangerous, but it cuts the travel time to around 7 hours. Tour operators in town offer tickets for $30 (£20).

Luang Say Cruises (Ban Vat Sene, Sakkarine Rd., Luang Prabang, near Diethelm Travel; ✆ **071/252-553**; www.asian-oasis.com) also operates **tour boats** on the same route between Thailand and Luang Prabang. Starting at around $413 (£275) per person in high season, there are both 2- and 3-day trips that take you on the river in style, catered to and comfortable, with 1-night stops at the Luang Say Lodge and/or the Kamu Lodge, both charming, rustic ecolodges on the banks of the Mekong.

On all other river routes, such as the Nam Tha between Luang Namtha and Pak Beng and the Nam Ou from Nong Kiao to Luang Prabang, you essentially have to charter your own boat with other tourists. Contact any travel agent or tour provider to make arrangements and get more details (availability varies by season).

GETTING AROUND

Luang Prabang is easy to cover on foot or bicycle. If you get tired, tuk-tuks and jumbos cost about 5,000 kip (55¢/40) per trip (less with more people and some haggling). ***Note:***

Tips Where the Streets Have No Names

In Luang Prabang, though you'll see street signs, the same road can change names as it progresses through the city, making things confusing. For example, the main street (I refer to it as "restaurant row" at the town center) is Chao Fa Ngum, Sisavangvong, or Sakkarine Road, depending on where you are. Locals use village names, not streets, to navigate, and villages are commonly named for the local *wat*. When checking into your hotel, get a business card or ask the name of the local *wat* to tell taxi and tuk-tuk drivers. Also note that the Western spelling of many street and *wat* names is very inconsistent. Just sound it out.

Citing the many accidents in recent years, local officials have put the kibosh on motorbike rentals (which also ensures work for local transportation providers). Luang Prabang is a town for walking, really, but it is a shame that you can no longer go putt-putting out to the waterfalls.

Vatthanaluck Vehicle Rental, around the corner from the Villa Santi (✆ **071/212-838**), covers all the bases for rentals and is the best bet of the many competitors. Bicycles go for just $1 (65p) per day; a rented car with driver is $25 (£17). For sights outside the city, jumbos and tuk-tuks usually gather along Xieng Thong Road across from the popular cafes and restaurants; prices are negotiable.

Longtail boats are for hire at Luang Prabang's main pier and can take you to adjacent villages and the Pak Ou Caves (p. 253).

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

In addition to the following recommendations, small tour offices with good budget ticket services are chockablock in town, especially on "restaurant row." Try **All Lao Services** (5/7 Sisavangvong Rd.; ✆ **071/252-785**; fax 071/253-523) for ticketing, rentals, and Internet access.

- **Diethelm Travel**, Sakkarine Road, near the Villa Santi (✆ **071/212-277**; fax 071/212-032; www.diethelmtravel.com). The top agent in town, Diethelm arranges city tours and excursions to out-of-town sights.
- **Exotissimo Travel**, 44/3 Ban Vat Nong, Khemkong Rd. (✆ **071/252-879**; fax 071/252-879; www.exotissimo.com).

Fast Facts Luang Prabang

Currency Exchange U.S. dollars and Thai baht are both widely accepted here. The **Lane Xang Bank** is at Photisarath Road near the post office. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 8:30am to 3:30pm. You can exchange cash and traveler's checks in most major currencies. You can also withdraw cash using a Visa card. There's another Lane Xang money-changing office on Xieng Thong Road next to the Luang Prabang Bakery. **Banque Pour Le Commerce Extérieur Lao** has an office on "restaurant row" (✆ **071/252-983**).

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **071/212-453**; for a medical emergency, call ✆ **071/252-049**.

Internet Access Service was once patched through Vientiane, but now cable and satellite connections mean you can easily keep in touch from Luang Prabang. Internet cafes line the busy block of Photisarath, "restaurant row," and are also scattered about town. Expect to pay around 6,000 kip per minute (70¢/45p per hour).

Mail The post office is on the corner of Photisarath and Kitsalat roads, across from Luang Prabang Travel and Tourism. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to noon and 1 to 5pm, Saturday from 8am to noon.

Telephones The city code for Luang Prabang is **71.** The telephone center in town consists of two booths around the corner from the post office on Kitsalat Road. You can buy local and international phone cards in an office across the street.

WHERE TO STAY

Luang Prabang's UNESCO World Heritage status mercifully prevents large-scale construction in the historic center. As a result, developers have renovated existing hotels and completed boutique conversions of old guesthouses. A few resorts have also sprung up on the outskirts of town to keep up with demand. Keep at an eye out for the new **Aman** destination, which is being hypersecretive preopening, but should be open by the time you read this. Promotional and low-season rates are available at most hotels, but be aware that a surcharge is often levied in the busy months. Book ahead from November through March and during the Lao New Year festivities in mid-April.

Expensive

Grand Luang Prabang (Xieng Keo) ★ Though La Résidence (see below) still reigns supreme in Luang Prabang, the princely accommodations of the Grand (former residence of Prince Phetsarath) are an excellent alternative. The garden landscape adds a wonderful cocoonlike ambience and is big enough to wander around and get lost in the beauty of this picturesque resort. The courtyard pool is also a tad more spacious than other resorts' in town, but the Grand falls short on the amenities. All rooms have private balconies with fabulous views overlooking the mountains and the Mekong River. Go for the Mexong Deluxe suites, which are the same price as the Deluxe units but have the added bonus of better views, being situated in the guesthouse closest to the river.

Baan Xiengkeo, Khet Sangkalok (about 6km/3¾ miles south of the town center), Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/253-851.** Fax 071/253-027. www.grandluangprabang.com. 78 units. $140–$150 (£93–£100) deluxe; $250–$300 (£167–£200) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; laundry service. *In room:* TV, minibar, hair dryer.

La Résidence Phou Vao ★★ Luang Prabang's finest hotel offers deluxe accommodations, excellent service, and a lofty perch away from the fray of the busy town center. Rooms are priced accordingly, but worth it. The Phou Vao is named for the hill on which it stands. Shallow ponds trace the courtyards that connect the buildings, and bushes of bougainvillea, palm, and frangipani frame views of Phoussi hill in the distance. The views are especially lovely from the pool area and the balconies of the more choice rooms. The accommodations are like small suites, decorated with a bamboo-and-wood

inlaid headboard, fine rosewood furniture, and retro fixtures such as fans and mosquito netting. The large marble bathrooms feature oversize stone tubs and dark-teak sink stands. Private balconies come with low, Lao-style divans. The Phou Vao combines the amenities of a city hotel with a boutique, upscale rustic charm. The recently opened spa, consisting of luxury cottages set around an infinity-edge pool and lily pond overlooking the town below, further solidifies the Phou Vao's position as the premier hotel in Luang Prabang.

Phou Vao St., P.O. Box 50, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/212-194.** Fax 071/212-534. www.residencephouvao.com. 34 units. $193–$355 (£129-£237) garden view; $212–$385 (£141–£257) mountain view; $238–$425 (£159–£283) mountain pool view; $259–$485 (£173–£323) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa w/sauna and steam room; business center w/Internet access; shopping; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe.

Les 3 Nagas ★ This hotel's original structure was built in 1898 as an unofficial reception area for the royal family before being converted into an ice-cream factory in the 1930s. A newer wing across the street was built in 1903 by a counselor to King Sisavangvong. The inspired recent renovation has just the right mix of style, convenience, and connection with local living and history. That style can be seen in the clean-lined rosewood interiors, contemporary Asian furniture, and Lao touches such as woven floor mats and ladders to upper floors. Bathrooms are done in dark wood, showered and all. Convenience points are earned because the hotel is close to the town center, but far enough from the din to afford some peace. The connection to history comes as the very professional staff welcomes you to a place that provides a glimpse into an aristocratic Indochine of a bygone era. The hotel restaurant (p. 247) is tops, too.

Just farther along the peninsula from "restaurant row," P.O. Box 772, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/253-888.** www.alilahotels.com/3nagas. 15 units. $105 (£70) double; $140 (£93) junior suite; $180 (£120) executive suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe/bar; outdoor pool; bicycle rental; tour desk; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Maison Souvannaphoum ★ Set among the trees and manicured gardens just off Nam Phou fountain, the Maison is steeped in history and colonial charm. Until 1975 the private residence of Prince Souvannaphouma, former prime minister in the Royal Lao Government, the old L'Hotel Souvannaphoum has been given a face-lift and reopened under the Colours of Angsana banner. The beautifully restored La Residence wing offers one twin and three suites, the largest of which, the Maison Suite, was the prince's bedroom. La Residence rooms retain their original parquet floors and guests here receive nice perks such as afternoon tea and discounts at the boutique. Rooms in the newer Garden Wing are small but elegant, with recessed lighting, unique wall nooks, and oversize daybeds that convert into extra beds. Spacious marble balconies, furnished with comfortable wicker chairs, overlook the gardens and small but inviting swimming pool. Unfortunately, the spa is not up to Angsana's normally high standards. Due to UNESCO restrictions, it is housed in tents set close to the main road, rendering the treatment areas noisy and lacking in privacy. Head to the Phou Vao for your spa needs instead.

Rue Chao Fa Ngum (on Namphou Sq.), P.O. Box 741, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/254-609.** Fax 071/212-577. www.angsana.com. 24 units. $200 (£133) garden room; $220 (£147) veranda room; $250 (£167) La Residence twin; $300–$400 (£200–£267) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small pool; spa; bicycle rental; boutique; laundry service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Satri House ★ This royal residence-turned-boutique hotel has an authentic edge over the competitors. As a UNESCO–protected Heritage House, it is both limited and

liberated in terms of amenities and decor. There's no minibar because fridges would be against the rules, but the walls are adorned with authentic royal memorabilia such as Buddha carvings from the royal temple and original furniture decorates rooms and public spaces. The family suite is large and luxe, with an intriguing black wooden corner bathtub. Satri House is owned by the same woman behind the Satri Lao boutiques scattered around town. At time of writing the hotel was constructing two new houses, they should be finished by the time you read this.

57 Photisarath Rd., Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/253-491.** Fax 071/253-418. www.satrihouse.com. 15 units. High season $100–$120 (£67–£80) double; low season $85–$100 (£57–£67) double. 15 units. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

Villa Maly ★ The newest resort in Luang Prabang offers colonial Indochine style injected with a burst of color and whimsy. The former royal residence is composed of six single- and two-story houses placed around an outdoor courtyard pool. Rooms are done in shades of pastel pinks or greens, and offset with creamy gray floors and beams. Those on the second floor have sloped ceilings, lending a cozy, cabin feel. The lamps and mahogany furnishings are retro European style (ca. 1950s). Granite-floor bathrooms are ultra chic, with brightly painted walls partially dividing rain shower cubicles from the toilet and a hammered gold basin perched on a giant porcelain jar serving as the sink. Book a corner room overlooking the central courtyard swimming pool; otherwise, you'll be stuck with a dismal view of neighboring vacant lots. Room views and staff are better at La Residence, Villa Maly's main competitor, but this is an excellent addition to the city's high-end hotels. The resort is taking cues from Vietnam's luxe industry, staff was sent to La Résidence Hue (p. 314) and Press Club (p. 289) for training, and the hotel's designer did boutique hotel La Veranda in Phu Quoc.

B.P. 158, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/253-904.** Fax 071/254-912. www.villa-maly.com. 33 units. High season $250 (£167) superior, $350 (£233) deluxe; low season $190 (£127) superior, $280 (£187) deluxe. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; nice outdoor pool; spa; salon; electric bicycle rental; boutique; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, hair dryer, safe.

Villa Santi Hotel ★ For charm and convenience, the Villa Santi is the top in-town residence. Formerly the home of Lao princess Manilay, this low-key villa reopened in 1992. Whether in the original building, in the nearby annex, or at the latest venture some 6km (3¾ miles) from town (see Villa Santi Resort, below), you'll find peaceful elegance and a connection with culture and nature. The decor is deluxe colonial, with overstuffed pillows, fine linens, mosquito netting, local weaving, parquet floors, and rosewood furniture. The tile bathrooms are small but neat. Nice touches include old-fashioned sun umbrellas available for borrowing, plus fresh flowers in every room. The newer annex just across the street has common balcony sitting areas and a charm all its own. Only four rooms have king-size beds, so be sure to specify when you book if that's what you want. The staff is friendly and professional. The downtown location is terrific, right in the thick of things.

Sakkarine St., P.O. Box 681, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/212-267.** Fax 071/252-158. www.villasantihotel.com. 14 units. $170 (£113) double; $250 (£167) suite. Special Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, safe.

Villa Santi Resort ★★ This resort is a roomier rural companion to the popular downtown Villa Santi and similarly sophisticated, without being stuffy. Tucked among lush rice paddies and picturesque hills, this little Eden has a tranquil stream that tiptoes

through the grounds, a placid pond, and an open garden area. The buildings seem at ease with the surroundings, and from the open-air, high-ceilinged lobby to the two-story villas scattered about, there's a certain harmony to the place. Rooms are larger versions of those at the downtown Villa Santi, with similar tile floors, dark rosewood trim, and local decoration. The hotel has laid claim to the largest swimming pool in town and plans to add tennis courts and a fitness center in the near future. The staff is kind and courteous, and will ensure efficient transport to and from town (as with the other resorts, distance is the biggest drawback here).

Santi Resort Rd., Ban Nadeuay, P.O. Box 681 (6km/3¾ miles from town, a 10-min. drive), Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/253-470.** Fax 071/253-471. www.villasantihotel.com. 52 units. $110 (£73) deluxe double; $185 (£123) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Moderate

Ancient Luang Prabang ★★ This hotel closed down for 3 years for a top-to-bottom makeover, and the final result is lovely. Lao textiles mix with contemporary comforts such as flatscreen TVs in the rooms and new Mac computers for Internet access in the open-space lobby. Twelve rooms named after Chinese zodiac animals are bachelor style, with dark-wood floors and spacious tubs in most. Staff is friendly if a bit stiff on monetary matters (one guest had to pay to charge his iPod using the lobby computer's USB port, and a complimentary day-old muffin was out of the question for me even though I left before breakfast was served). It's located right beside the night market, so grab a room with a balcony on the top floor and watch the chaos unfurl below. If you're aiming for a bit more peace and quiet, book yourself into the Snake room, which faces away from the market and has a sleek stone tub in the corner.

Sisavangvong Rd., Ban Pakarm, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/212-264.** Fax 071/212-804. www.ancientluangprabang.com. 12 units. High season $60 (£40) double; low season $55 (£37) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Apsara ★★ Named after the celestial nymphs in Hindu mythology that grace the frescoes of Angkor Wat, the British-owned Apsara is a stylish choice. Set on the less-developed Nam Khan River side of the Luang Prabang isthmus, rooms are split between two beautiful colonials. Superior units are like loft spaces with high ceilings, old wood floors, and fashionable room dividers separating the bathroom area from the living space. Modern dark-wood furniture is highlighted by four-poster beds covered with hand-woven silks and plush pillows. Smaller standard rooms are just as airy. French doors leading to either a patio by the road or a second-floor balcony let in an abundance of light, especially in the morning. The bar and restaurant are top-notch, but early-to-bedders beware: Two second-story rooms are immediately above the restaurant and can be noisy until closing time. Large families or groups should inquire about the nearby Villa Savanh, a three-bedroom traditional house that the hotel rents on a nightly basis.

Kingkitsarath Rd. (on the Nam Khan River), Ban Wat Sene, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/254-670.** Fax 071/254-252. www.theapsara.com. 13 units. $70–$80 (£47–£53) standard; $75–$120 (£50–£80) superior. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* A/C.

Le Calao ★★ This restored 1904 villa stands near the tip of Luang Prabang's peninsula on the banks of the Mekong. Unique and picturesque, it has a location and style all its own. The second-floor rooms are a nice size, with high sloping ceilings, wood furniture, neat tile floors, and firm beds. Bathrooms have wood cabinetry but are otherwise rather spartan, with no tubs. The staff is, well . . . hey, where did the staff go? What sells

these rooms and commands the seemingly high price tag is that each unit has a large private balcony facing the majestic Mekong. The casual ambience at the Calao comes at a premium, but the place is quite popular (be sure to book ahead). The newly renovated downstairs suite (formerly a kitchen and staff room) has two double beds and a private balcony, perfect for a family with kids.

Khaem Khong Rd. (on the Mekong River, close to Wat Xieng Thuong), Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/212-100.** Fax 071/212-085. www.calaoinn.laopdr.com. 6 units. $70–$80 (£47–£53) double; $65 (£43) family suite. V. **Amenities:** Cafe/bar; laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

Mouang Luang Hotel ★ A 10-minute walk from town on a quiet street north of the Souvannaphoum, the Mouang Loung is adorned with traditional Lao temple–style roofs. The rooms at the Mouang Luang are clean, with parquet floors and marble-tiled bathrooms (all with smallish tubs). Street-side rooms have balconies. There's an open-air Lao restaurant in the back, and just above it is an enormous balcony reserved for Baci ceremonies. Mouang Luang has the distinction of being one of the only hotels in town with a pool (there's a charge of $3/£2 for nonguests). The staff is very friendly, and the place is popular with groups. If it's full, try **Le Parasol Blanc**, its sister property (✆ **071/252-124**).

Bounkhong Rd., P.O. Box 779, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/212-791.** Fax 071/212-790. mgluang@laotel.com. 35 units. $74 (£49) double; $100 (£67) deluxe. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; laundry service; dry cleaning; conference room. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Sala Prabang ★★ Finds Here's a trendsetter in developing Luang Prabang: an old riverside colonial that's been refurbished and refitted by its architect/owner, the walls reinforced with stone, and good hot-water showers and air-conditioning installed. The renovation was done with some panache, with beams and supports made of rough natural wood, sponge painting, and cool neutral tones throughout. The lobby area is a chic open-air space overlooking the Mekong, and top-end rooms on the second floor are large and have great balcony views. A recent expansion added seven naturally styled rooms in a riverfront villa down the street, as well as Nadao (under construction at press time), an offshoot of the Vientiane favorite Le Nadao, promising the same high-quality French cuisine at its riverside perch. Sala Prabang is a boutique guesthouse at its best, and a model that will likely be copied.

Mekong Riverside Rd., 102/6 Thanon Ounkham, Xieng Mouane, P.O. Box 902, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/252-460.** Fax 071/252-472. www.salalao.com. 29 units. Low season $50–$60 (£33–£40) double; high season $60–$75 (£40–£50) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; airport transfer; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Another good budget choice is the **Senesouk**, Ban Vat Sene (✆ **071/212-074**), with tidy, quiet rooms from $30 (£20).

Sayo Guesthouse ★ This guesthouse isn't trying to be anything more than it is, and that's its charm. Service is nonexistent, and the lobby is just a little hallway but the rooms on the second floor are enormous. Ceilings are practically barn height, and the rooms are done up with tasteful Lao decorations. Bathrooms are clean, large, and of the all-in-one variety (shower and toilet together). The rooms in the back are smaller, with exposed brick and unique loft spaces like little crows' nests. Sayo Guesthouse is basic, but it's an eccentric place with a lot of character. The location is convenient to the main street.

In front of Vat Xieng Mouane (btw. Sisavangvong Rd. and the Mekong), P.O. Box 1060, Luang Prabang. ✆ **071/252-614.** 27 units. $30–$70 (£20–£47) double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Laundry service.

Villa Sokxai This is a basic guesthouse in an attractive colonial that happens to be in one of my favorite spots in town. Clean rooms have wood floors, soft beds, and both air-conditioning and a fan, a real plus for some. Try for an upstairs room overlooking the balcony and Wat Phon Heuang—this is one of the first spots where monks receive their morning alms, and the hotel staff can help you buy sticky rice if you'd like to make merit. At dusk, you can sit on the balcony and listen to the hypnotic chanting drone of the evening prayers. One drawback is the Sokxai's poorly run reservations system; you should confirm your reservation more than once before arriving. If it's full, look for its sister hotel, **Villa Sokxai 2**, on the other side of Mount Phousi.

Sakalin Rd. (across from Wat Phon Heuang), Ban Kilee, Luang Prabang. ✆/fax **071/254-309.** sokxaigh@yahoo.com. 7 units. $35 (£23) double; $50 (£33) family suite. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

WHERE TO DINE

New upmarket bistros, many run by foreign restaurateurs, have added to the culinary diversity of little Luang Prabang. Affordable open-air Lao eateries still cater to hungry backpackers returning from the back of beyond, and Luang Prabang remains a wonderful place to explore authentic Lao cuisine or savor some excellent French and Western meals. Whatever your cuisine of choice, dining in this sleepy northern burg is a delight.

Expensive

L'Elephant ★★ FRENCH This stylish bistro is where it's at for fine dining in Luang Prabang. Run by French expats, it has a laid-back, retro-chic atmosphere inside a high-ceilinged colonial. There are daily and weekly specials, and just about everything is good, especially the imported steaks. Tasty cheeses and wines are also imported, though local stock is used whenever possible. Boar and venison specials are popular, for example. The wine list could hold its own in a much larger city, and it's unlikely that you'll stump the barman. Daily set menus explore the best of what's available in the kitchen. A range of tasty dishes, from coq au vin to grilled buffalo to a vegetarian savory baked eggplant, covers all the bases. L'Elephant is very expensive for Laos, but more than worth it. Be sure to make a reservation—it's often fully booked.

Ban Vat Nong. ✆ **071/252-482.** www.elephant-restau.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $8–$12 (£5.30–£8). MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 6–10pm.

Les 3 Nagas ★★ LAO You can get real Lao cuisine done right at this new open-air spot on the quiet end of "restaurant row." Dining here is as sumptuous an affair as a stay at the connected 3 Nagas boutique hotel (p. 243). Meals are based on the culinary styles of the chef's own hometown, presented on fine china by a meticulous and capable waitstaff (you won't find the bones and gristle of traditional Lao restaurants here). Start your meal with betel-leaf soup before moving on to sautéed local mushrooms (when in season), *laap*, and grilled delicacies, from chicken satay to whole chunks of hearty river fish, lightly marinated in lemon grass and chiles. For dessert, go for the Lao-style crème brûlée, a custard of pumpkin and coconut that's divine. Great coffee, too. ***Note:*** 3 Nagas' Lao restaurant sometimes closes during the low season, so call ahead.

In Les 3 Nagas hotel, just farther along the peninsula from "restaurant row." ✆ **071/252-079** or 071/253-888. www.3nagas.com. Main courses $2–$35 (£1.30–£23). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Moderate

Apsara ★ LAO/INTERNATIONAL This riverside restaurant is a delightful place for an evening repast. Portions are generous and staff is friendly. The banana leaf-wrapped

 fish with ginger and lemon grass is savory and perfectly seasoned. Order the deep-fried spring rolls for a mouthwatering appetizer. Apsara's quiet ambience is a lovely getaway from the din of Sisavangvong Road.

Kingkitsarath Rd. ✆ **071/254-670.** Main courses $6.50–$10 (£4.30–£6.65). Set menus $12–$14 (£8–£9.30). MC, V. Daily 6:30am–10pm.

Couleur Café and Restaurant ★ LAO/FRENCH This unassuming but atmospheric down-alley bistro features affordable fine dining. Several local expats prefer the food here to that of L'Elephant (see above). The decor is elegantly sparse, with colonial-size high ceilings and walls adorned with the work of local artists. Though run by a young French expat, the bistro has Lao specialties such as steamed fish with coconut in banana leaf, or perhaps fried prawns in oyster sauce. Both are served with sticky rice, of course. Eggplant, mushrooms, and crispy green beans are combined in a tasty Casserole Luang Prabang. Order up some Mekong seaweed for an interesting appetizer, and ask about the fine Lao whiskey and imported wines. It's a quiet little getaway for next to nothing.

48/5 Ban Vat Nong. ✆ **071/254-694.** Main courses 25,000 kip–150,000 kip ($2.90–$18/£1.90–£12). MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 4:30–10:30pm.

Indochina Spirit ★ LAO/THAI/WESTERN Housed in a restored 70-year-old wooden home, Indochina Spirit, as its name suggests, dishes up as much atmosphere as it does good grub. This gorgeous Lao home has been put to lovely use and now features traditional Lao music most evenings from 7:30 to 8pm (check the chalkboard in front to make sure). Indochina Spirit has done a great job with the simple local decor inside and charming garden dining outside. The menu is an ambitious list of Lao, Thai, and Western dishes. It's a good place to have a drink, enjoy an affordable appetizer plate, and hear some good music before strolling the city at night.

Ban Vat That 52, opposite the fountain across from Maison Souvannaphoum. ✆ **071/252-372.** Main courses $5–$10 (£3.30–£6.65). MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

Restaurant Luang Prabang ★ LAO/WESTERN This corner restaurant at the eastern end of the night market lures in a steady crowd of people. Popular dishes are the American-style burgers, pizzas, and salads, though a bevy of Lao options are also available. Cakes are sumptuous and affordable. The setting is atmospheric, with tiered outdoor seating lit up at night with pretty twinkle lights. A great place to cure hunger pangs and people-watch on "restaurant row."

Sisavangvong Rd. ✆ **071/252-499.** Main courses 28,000 kip–70,000 kip ($3.30–$8.15/£2.15–£5.40). MC, V. Daily 7am–11:30pm.

Tamnak Lao Restaurant ★★ LAO This renovated colonial in the temple district is one of the few offering a full range of Lao dishes. For the best variety, try one of the Tamank's three set menus. A sample of two, offering a total of 10 dishes, could include pork casserole in coconut milk, *lahp pla* (spicy fish salad), and pork stuffed in crispy bamboo shoots. The casseroles are more like stew, with a sweet-and-sour taste that pairs wonderfully with a bowl of sticky rice.

Sakhalin Rd., Ban Wat Sene. ✆ **071/252-525.** Main courses 18,000 kip–75,000 kip ($2.10–$5/£1.40–£5.80); set menus $7–$9 (£4.65–£6). MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

Villa Santi ★★ LAO/CONTINENTAL On the upper floor of the popular hotel's main building (p. 244), this atmospheric open-air perch has just the right angle on the busy street below. Set with linen and silver, a candlelight table on the balcony is hands-down the

town's most romantic spot. The food is local and traditional Lao, along with some creative Asian-influenced Continental (on the whole, though, it's a bit uninspired—stick to Lao and Thai specials, and sample one of the fine curries). The daily set menus are always a good choice. The desserts are scrumptious: Try bananas flambéed in Cointreau, or fruit salad in rum. There are more casual offerings for lunch, including burgers. Most evenings feature traditional music and dancing in the courtyard below.

In Villa Santi Hotel, Sakkarine St. ✆ **071/212-267.** Main courses $4–$8 (£2.65–£5.30). V. Daily 6:30am–10:30pm.

Inexpensive

For good eats and the company of many fellow travelers, don't miss what we've called "**restaurant row**" (it's hard to miss on any trip to Luang Prabang). It is the only place in town alive past 9pm, though it quickly dies at 11pm. If restaurants are empty, they may close earlier. This fun, affordable place is great for exploring—almost like a Khao San Road.

Café des Arts ★ FRENCH/CONTINENTAL Pasta, hamburgers, crepes, *filet de boeuf*, and tartines round out the very appetizing menu here. Breakfast brings omelets galore. Open-air like all the others on "restaurant row," Café des Arts has a better atmosphere than most, with real tables and chairs (not plastic), linen tablecloths, and a gallery of local artwork for sale.

Sisavangvong Rd. (on "restaurant row"). ✆/fax **071/252-162.** Main courses 18,000 kip–75,000 kip ($2.10–$8.70/£1.40–£5.80). MC, V. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

Nazim Restaurant ★ INDIAN Just like the other Nazim outlets in Vientiane and Vang Vieng, Nazim serves a fine complement of good curries and halal food. The dining area is kind of grubby, but the food is great and Nazim is always packed. There's another location on "restaurant row," Sisavangvong Road, at the town center (✆ **071/253-493**).

78/4 Ban Visoun, Visounnarath Rd. ✆ **071/252-263.** www.nazim.laopdr.com. Main courses 12,000 kip–28,000 kip ($1.40–$3.30/90p–£2.15). No credit cards. Daily 8:30am–11pm.

Park Houay Mixay ★ LAO A popular lunch option for package tours, this looks more like a traditional Lao restaurant than the places on "restaurant row." Note the tin roof, beat-up wood floors and tables, and numerous pets and kids running around—but you come here for the food, not the ambience. The large portions of delicious and cheap Lao and Thai dishes are not watered down for Western palates. If you're here for lunch, make sure the ubiquitous tour group has been served already, or else you're in for a long wait.

Ban Xieng Mouane. ✆ **071/212-260.** Main courses 23,000 kip–45,000 kip ($2.70–$5.25/£1.75–£3.50). MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6:30–9:30pm.

Tamarind Café LAO This tiny restaurant is a popular place to sample Lao food. The five-bite taster platter, with Lao sausage and various dips served with sticky rice, is a good place to start. Staff is brisk and not unfriendly, but nothing to write home about. The kitchen is small, so sit back and enjoy the fine views of Wat Nong while you wait for your food.

Ban Wat Nong. ✆ **020/777-0484.** Main courses 27,000 kip–40,000 kip ($3.15–$4.65/£2.10–£3.10). No credit cards. Mon–Sat 11am–6pm. Dinner available only for groups that have prebooked.

Snacks & Cafes

For atmosphere, there is nowhere better than **L'étranger: Books and Tea** (booksinlaos@yahoo.com), in Ban Vat Aphay on the back side of Phousy Hill (the opposite side from

the main street and royal palace) near the Nam Khan River. The friendly Canadian owners are full of good advice and lend books from their downstairs collection. Have a pot of tea or a cocktail (don't miss the *lao-lao* margarita) in their atmospheric upstairs teahouse and gallery; it's also a good place on a steamy afternoon to relax on the floor against a cozy Lao cushion while perusing one of the old *National Geographic* magazines. Young travelers descend for the films, played each day at 4 and 7pm.

A popular restaurant on "restaurant row," the **Luang Prabang Bakery**, 11/7 Sisavangvong Rd. (✆ **071/212-617**), serves some good pizza as well as a host of baked goods, plus has an extensive collection of books. Farther east, the **Scandinavian Bakery**, 52/6 Sisavangvong (✆ **071/252-223**), and chic, air-conditioned **Joma** (✆ **071/252292**) both serve similar fine coffee and baked goods.

The same team of expats who run L'Elephant (see above) own **Le Café Ban Wat Sene** (✆ **071/252-482**), an atmospheric, open-air space. Their desserts and coffee are excellent, as are their light lunch specials of sandwiches and salads. They also offer wireless Internet access. Find them just across from the elementary school.

The best place in town for authentic French crepes, savory or sweet, is **Dao Fa**, on Sisavangvong Road (✆ **071/252-656**), also a good spot for people-watching. It has excellent Mediterranean entrees and homemade pastas cooked to order, too.

Vegetarians should be on the lookout for the side-street buffets by the **Night Market**, along Photisarath Road. Only 5,000 kip (55¢/40p) gets you a bowl and all the nonmeaty goodness you can handle.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Mount Phousi ★★ Rising from the center of town, Phousi has temples scattered on all sides of its slopes and a panoramic view of the entire town from its top. **That Chomsi Stupa**, built in 1804, is its crowning glory. Taking the path to the northeast, you will pass **Wat Tham Phousi**, which has a large-bellied Buddha, Kaccayana. **Wat Phra Bat Nua**, farther down, has a yard-long footprint of the Buddha. Be prepared for the 355 steps to get there. Try to make the hike, which will take about an hour with sightseeing, in the early morning or late afternoon to escape the sun's burning rays. A great spot for sunset, if you don't mind sharing the experience with hordes of other tourists.

Photisarath Rd., across from the Palace Museum. Admission 20,000 kip ($2.35/£1.55). Daily dawn–dusk.

Royal Palace Museum ★★ The palace, built for King Sisavang Vong from 1904 to 1909, was the royal residence until the Pathet Lao seized control of the country in 1975. The last Lao king, Sisavang Vattana, and his family were exiled to a remote region in the northern part of the country and never heard from again. Rumor has it that they perished in a prison camp, though the government has never said so. The palace remains as a repository of treasures, rather scanty but still interesting. You can begin your tour by walking the length of the long porch; the gated open room to your right has one of the museum's top attractions, a replica of a golden standing Buddha that was a gift to King Fa Ngum from a Khmer king. Known as "The Prabang" (thus the town's name), which translates to "holy image," the original was cast in Sri Lanka in the 1st century a.d.

Don't miss the busts of the last dynasty of kings. The central throne room is done in colorful glass mosaics dating from a renovation in the 1930s. Past the throne rooms is a compound of large, spartan bedrooms with what little finery was left after the departure of the last king. The temple at the compound entrance is a gilded wedding cake, and the large Soviet-made statue of Sisavang Vong, the first king under the Lao constitution, has a stiff raised fist like a caricature of Lenin.

Tips Make Merit

Picture Sunday Mass at a typical church somewhere: Everyone is seated, ready for the ceremony to begin. The priest and altar boys start to walk down the aisle. Suddenly, visiting tourists rush to the end of the pews and start photographing like paparazzi, flashes and all. Sound crazy? Well that's what happens at Luang Prabang's *Tak Bat,* or *Make Merit,* a living religious ritual that occurs at dawn each day. The procession of saffron-clad monks walking down the streets of Luang Prabang to collect the food offerings of devout, kneeling Buddhists is a breathtaking site. But it is disrespectful to treat it as a tourist show. When I watched, several travelers were chatting while they were giving food and thrusting cameras uncomfortably close to the monks. One man, after he had given away all his sticky rice, hollered across the street to his companions, "All right, should we move on to the outdoor market then?" Monks were still walking past him. Put your best foot forward here and observe these local customs (as laid out by the National Tourism Authority) before you take part in or simply watch the act of *Tak Bat:*

- Observe the ritual in silence and contribute an offering only if it is meaningful for you and you can do so respectfully.
- Buy the rice at the local market earlier in the morning rather than from street vendors along the monks' route.
- If you are not making an offering, keep an appropriate distance and be respectful. Don't get in the way of the monks' procession or people giving alms.
- Do not photograph the monks too closely; camera flashes are very disturbing for both the monks and those giving alms.
- Dress appropriately; your shoulders, chest, and legs should be covered.
- Do not make physical contact with the monks.

The palace hosts a growing troupe of dancers who perform at the Royal Theater. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 6pm, tourists can take part in a Baci ceremony and view the historical reenactment of the *Ramayana*. Tickets are $5 (£3.30).

Photisarath Rd. ✆ **071/212470.** Admission 30,000 kip ($3.50/£2.30). Mon–Sat 8–11am and 1:30–4pm. ***Warning:*** At 11am the museum will kick you out, and you'll have to pay *again* to come back after lunch.

The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) ★★ This museum is a fantastic place to learn about the various ethnic minorities of Laos. The modest-size center is housed in the 1920s former residence of a French colonial judge. Staff is extremely friendly and can answer any questions you have. The handful of exhibits are well curated, displaying traditional clothing, weaving looms, and household wares. Accompanying explanations are in Lao and English. Entry fees and donations go directly toward running TAEC and promoting cultural diversity and preservation. There's a small shop in the back selling textiles and housewares purchased directly from artisan communities.

Photisarath Rd. ✆ **071/253-364.** Admission 20,000 kip ($2.30/£1.55). www.taeclaos.org. Tues–Sun 9am–6pm.

Wat Mai ★★ Wat Mai is one of the jewels of Luang Prabang. Its golden bas-relief facade tells the story of Phravet, one of the last avatars, or reincarnations, of the Buddha.

This *wat* held the Pra Bang Buddha from 1894 until 1947. Stop by at 5:30pm for the evening prayers, when the monks chant in harmony.

Photisarath Rd., near the Lane Xang Bank. Daily dawn–dusk.

Wat Wisunalat/Visounarath ★ Wisunalat is known for its absolutely huge golden Buddha in the *sim*, the largest in town at easily 6m (20 ft.) tall. The *wat* was constructed in 1512 and held the famous Pra Bang Buddha from 1513 to 1894. On the grounds facing the *sim* is the famous **That Makmo**, or watermelon stupa, a survivor since 1504. Wat Aham is a few steps away from the Wisunalat *sim.*

At the end of Wisunalat Rd. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Xieng Thong ★★ Xieng Thong is the premier *wat* of Luang Prabang. Built in 1560 by King Say Setthathirat, it is situated at the tip of Luang Prabang's peninsula where it juts out into the Mekong. Xieng Thong survived numerous invading armies, making its facade one of the oldest originals in the city. To the left of the main temple, find the "red chapel" and its rare statue of a reclining Buddha that dates back to the temple's construction. The statue is one of the premier Buddha images in the country, with an attitude sublime; the piece actually traveled to the World's Fair in Paris in 1931. The glass mosaics adorning all external buildings date from only the 1950s, but are fun depictions of popular folk tales and Buddhist history; note the "tree of life" on the side of the main temple. Facing the courtyard from the temple steps, the building on the right contains the funeral chariot of King Sisavang Vong with its seven-headed *naga* (snake) decor. The chariot was carved by venerated Lao sculptor Thid Tun. There are also some artifacts inside, including ancient marionettes.

At the end of Xieng Thong Rd. Admission 20,000 kip ($2.30/£1.55). Daily 8am–6pm.

Sights Outside the City

Other sights outside of town include **Wat Phon Phao (Peacefulness Temple)**, a golden stupa on a hilltop about 5km (3 miles) away, best viewed from afar—though the view

Moments

Taking Refuge: Making Friends at the Temple

There is little that's spectacular on the sleepy peninsula of Luang Prabang. Rather, time spent here is about soaking up the atmosphere and taking leisurely walks along dusty lanes lined with French colonial buildings. Another great local activity is to stop in at a temple—any temple, really—and meet with the monks or young novices. The monks are great sources of information and insight into Laos culture, Buddhism, and the vagaries of human existence. Language is a big part of their training, and they study Pali and Sanskrit as well as English and French (and even Chinese and Japanese). Novices are keen to practice their English or even get help with their homework. Women should be careful not to touch or sit too close to monks and novices, but all are welcome in the temple. Don't give in to any pleas for sponsorship (unless you want to); monks live through the generosity of the *sangha*, or monastic community, and don't need sponsors.

Spa Treatments for All Budgets

The newly opened spa at **La Résidence Phou Vao** (p. 242) is by far the most luxurious in town. Like the hotel itself, treatments are pricey but well worth the money. The **Red Cross of Luang Prabang**, near Wat Visoun to the southeast of the city, offers traditional massage and herbal sauna to raise money for its education programs. The Red Cross is the cheapest place in town, in addition to funding a good cause. The herbal sauna is open daily from 4:30 to 8:30pm; a 1-hour massage (9am–8:30pm) costs just $3 (£2).

back to town from its height is worth the trek. From here, visit nearby **Ban Phanom Weaving Village**, a now-commercialized weaving collective where you can find deals on Lao Ikat patterns and hand-woven bags. Just past Ban Phanom and hidden in a jungle riverside area (signs point the way down the embankment), find the **Tomb of Henri Mouhot**, the 19th-century French explorer credited with the rediscovery of Cambodia's Angkor Wat. He died in Luang Prabang of malaria while hunting the source of the Mekong. **Day trips across the Mekong** to small temples and villages are also popular and can be arranged with boat drivers at quay-side.

Kuangsi Waterfall ★★ As famous now for its recent collapse as anything, Kuangsi was a tower of champagne-glass limestone formations until the whole structure fell in on itself in 2003. Locals say that tour operators became too greedy and neglected local spirits, called Pi. The falls are still beautiful, but less so. The ride here, however, is quite spectacular. You'll have to travel by *songthaew* (covered pickup) for $5 (£2.75) per person if shared, or by boat and tuk-tuk for the same fee.

Another option, **Tad Se Waterfall**, is 21km (13 miles) from town and good for swimming, even if it's less spectacular in height than Kuangsi. During the rainy season, the falls are stunning. Hire a driver for about $5 (£3.30), or pay a bit extra for a ferryboat.

36km (20 miles) south of town. Admission 10,000 kip ($1.15/75p). Daily dawn–dusk.

Pak Ou Caves ★★ The longtail-boat ride on the Mekong is alone a worthy day trip. This stretch of river is lovely—and from the base of the cave entrance, you get a view of the high cliffs and swirling water of the Nam Ou River as it joins the Mekong. Inside the caves are enshrined a pantheon of Buddhist statuary. A day tour costs $5 (£2.75) per person in a boat shared by many tourists (more for a private charter). Arrangements can be made at any hotel front desk at an inflated rate, or you can just go down along the Mekong and negotiate with boat drivers directly (these guys are sure to find you). The half-day trip often includes a visit to a weaving village or the **Lao Whiskey village**, where you'll have a chance to try some really potent local brew.

25km (16 miles) from town on the Mekong. Admission 15,000 kip ($1.75/£1.15).

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Luang Prabang is a good base for exploring the jungly north. The folks at **Green Discovery**, in the center of town (✆ **071/212-093**; www.greendiscoverylaos.com), are a top choice. They offer tours and connections to the far north in Luang Namtha, in addition to multisport adventures along the Mekong and the picturesque Nam Ou out of Nong Kiaw (east of Luang Prabang).

SHOPPING

Luang Prabang is a good place to find unique hand-woven textiles. The **Night Market** opens at dusk each evening, near Wat Mai along Photisarath Road at the town center. Everything from good silk to jewelry to T-shirts sells for a song.

Ban Lao Natural Products, on the Mekong riverfront (✆ **030/514-555**; www.ban-lao.com), offers locally produced handmade silks, handicrafts, clothing, and naturally made soaps and beauty products, while promising fair trade with its local producers to help increase sustainable development. **Kopnoi**, in Ban Aphay on the back side of Mount Phousi by the Nam Kham River, also offers a diverse product line, including jewelry and clothing, and promotes the exportation of products made in Laos (it also has an art gallery upstairs).

Natural papermaking has taken the town by storm, and **Baan Khily Gallery**, on the eastern end of Sisavangvong Road (✆ **071/212-611**), is where longtime German expat Oliver Bandmann produces and exhibits. Ask about papermaking classes.

Caruso, Sandra Yuck's inspired collection of housewares, furnishings, and silk, has an outlet in a renovated colonial along Sisavangvong, as well as a display area above Ban Vat Sene (see "Snacks & Cafes," above). And **Ban Mixay** (✆ **071/253-535**) is a branch of the popular Vientiane boutique that sells the same quality silks, clothes, and handicrafts. **Ock Pop Tok** (73/5 Ban Wat Nong; ✆ **071/253-219**) carries pretty contemporary clothing and silks.

Lisa Regale (✆ **071/253-224**) has a collection of ready-to-wear silk, including some very unique antique pieces, at her gallery behind Wat Xieng Thong.

Satri Lao Silk, on "restaurant row," has good, affordable cloth, while **Naga Creations** (✆ **071/212-775**) presents an eclectic mix of jewelry. **Walkman Village** (✆ **020/567-3909**) is the place to find jackets, packs, and other travel gear before heading up north.

LUANG PRABANG AFTER DARK

Luang Prabang is a morning town, really, but there are a few good spots for drinks and music. Backpackers fill the quiet lanes of **Ban Wat That**, the old silversmith quarter near the Mekong on the east end of town, and you'll sometimes find folks up late. Take a walk down any alley for budget guesthouses and adjoining bamboo bars. **Lemongrass**, near the Sala Prabang, is an attractive wine bar with a small sitting area overlooking the Mekong, but the best selection of vino is at **Pack Luck Wine Bar** (Sakkaline Rd., opposite Bangkok Airways; ✆ **071/254-839**). **Restaurant Luang Prabang** (p. 248) always seems to attract a large after-dinner crowd enjoying a Beer Lao or four. The **Hive**, just next door to L'étranger (p. 249) and run by the same folks, plays drum-and-bass and hip-hop for a young crowd until late into the evening. Nearby the **House** (Ban Vat Aphay; ✆ **071/255-021**) is a newcomer to the scene and has a good selection of Belgian beer.

7 LUANG NAMTHA & THE FAR NORTH

North of Luang Prabang, things get a little rough. It's where Laos travel separates the "travelers" from the "tourists." Roads here are, on the whole, just dirt tracks, and most towns are outposts, like the dusty main streets in the American Old West. This part of the country is best visited with a tour company (try **Diethelm Travel** out of Luang Prabang, p. 214) or with a private car and driver.

Luang Namtha itself is not much to see, really—just a row of low concrete-and-wood storefronts on a dusty avenue and a few miles of bucolic road that take you to the

picturesque little **Old Town** (6km/3¾ miles down the main road); nonetheless, it's connected by air with Vientiane and is a great base to explore the surrounding countryside. Trekking, kayaking, and visiting remote villages in the phenomenal **Nam Ha Biodiversity Conservation Area**, named an ASEAN Heritage Park in 2005, bring many up to this outpost. Come with the knowledge that travel here is off the beaten track, you are far from all but the most basic medical assistance, and electricity flows only a few hours each day.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Lao Airlines flights from Vientiane run Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and cost 1,680,000 kip ($195/£130). The airport is 6km (3¾ miles) from town; a *songthaew* (covered pickup) will run about $4 (£2.65) with some friendly bargaining.

BY BUS Luang Namtha is a major hub in the north, connected by bus with Jinhong, China, via the Laos towns of Boten (you'll need to have a prearranged visa), Muang Sing, and Huay Xai. From Luang Prabang, you'll be bounced and jounced for 5 hours (25,000 kip/$2.90/£1.90) until the dusty bus stop in Oudomxay. If your teeth are still in your head and buses are leaving (most buses have morning departures), you can connect with Luang Namtha for 20,000 kip ($2.30/£1.55); sometimes there is no same-day connection, and travelers hole up for a $2 (£1.30) night in Oudomxay before the early morning connection with Luang Namtha. You can also hop on the through bus from Vientiane. Arriving sometime between 4 and 6pm in the afternoon, it's 10 hours overnight. Bus travel in the far north offers beautiful views and a chance to meet locals, but it is pretty grueling in the best of circumstances.

BY CAR Contact **Diethelm Travel** in Luang Prabang (✆ **071/212-277**; fax 071/212-032; www.diethelmtravel.com) for jeep or minivan rental. It's expensive, but a decent option for the north.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Green Discovery (✆ **086/211-484**; www.greendiscoverylaos.com), in cooperation with the New Zealand– and UNESCO-backed **Nam Ha Ecotourism Project** (✆ **086/312-150**; www.unescobkk.org) and the **Boat Landing Eco-Lodge**, puts together community-based ecotourism tours to Khmu and Hmong villages in the area, as well as great kayak and raft trips in the pristine Nam Ha NBCA. You'll visit villages where they'll ask, through a translator, "Why are you here?" because foreign wayfarers are still an anomaly. The Nam Ha River is an exciting white-water ride through cavernous jungle overgrowth or steep-walled gullies teeming with life. The folks at Green Discovery ensure that their clients set a good example and tread lightly in the villages, while the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project is designed so that revenue generated from the program goes directly to the villages and guides, developing the local economy and thereby encouraging forest conservation by reducing reliance on natural resources. Highly recommended.

Fast Facts Luang Namtha

Currency Exchange There are a few foreign exchange counters on the main road (Rte. 3), and **Lane Xang Bank** has a branch on the south end of town. You can also change U.S. and Thai currency to kip in the central market.

Internet Access There is one Internet cafe on the southern end of the main street, with service at 600 kip (5¢/5p) per minute.

Telephones Most guesthouses can do callback service. There are also phone booths on the main road that are IDD-capable and require a local card, which you can buy at any store or the post office.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

For lodging, the **Boat Landing** (from $30/£20; ✆ **086/312-398**; www.theboatlanding.laopdr.com) is a rustic little gem on the banks of the Nam Tha River some 6km (3 3/4 miles) from the town center (just past the old town in Luang Namtha). It has teamed up with **Green Discovery** to provide ecofriendly treks and tours to local villages and the Nam Ha Biodiversity Conservation Area. In Luang Namtha proper, an array of budget accommodations start at $2 (£1.30). Try **Oudomsinh Hotel** (✆ **086/312-077**).

8 XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE: PHONSAVAN & THE PLAIN OF JARS

Xieng Khouang has the dubious distinction of being one of the most heavily bombed provinces in the most heavily bombed country on earth. For centuries, it has been at the crossroads of war, culminating in the U.S.'s "secret war" against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army. The former capital city of Muang Khouang was so thoroughly destroyed by American bombing raids that the capital was moved in 1975 to Phonsavan, itself heavily damaged. However, the people do not seem to harbor any ill will and have taken the tragedy of the war years in stride, incorporating the remnants of war into their daily lives. Halved bombshells serve as pig troughs, ammunition cases function as lunch-boxes, metal tracks airlifted for makeshift runways are converted to convenient driveways, and there is even a village dedicated to and decorated by found shrapnel and bomb material. Today, Xieng Khouang is gaining recognition as home to the **Plain of Jars**, a little-understood group of archaeological sites of enormous stone jars, or drums, buried in the earth. **Phonsavan**, which has virtually no buildings remaining from the prewar years, is merely a base from which to explore the area and not much else. The jars themselves are a fun and interesting mystery. A visit to this region is certainly educational: You'll learn about the Hmong rebels, the mysterious recent history, and the many demining projects. Spring for a good guide to take you around to the many sites. ***Note:*** Higher altitude and weather patterns mean that it can get chilly here, especially in the rainy season, so bring a few layers.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Lao Airlines** (✆ **021/212-051**; www.laoairlines.com) flies to Xieng Khouang from Vientiane (660,000 kip/$77/£51) five times weekly, and Luang Prabang (same price as Vientiane) twice weekly, with return flights now offered to both cities. Schedules change with the seasons. Make sure you reconfirm your flight out *every day until you leave* to guarantee a seat back (flights overbook in the high season and get canceled in the low season).

Warning! Beware of Unexploded Ordnance

Xieng Khouang province is one of the most heavily bombed areas on earth. UXO, or unexploded ordnance, is numerous, particularly in the form of small cluster bombs, blue or gray metal balls about the size of a fist. Don't stray into uninhabited, unexplored areas without a good guide, and don't touch anything on the ground. The jar sites are safe.

BY BUS Daily buses connect Phonsavan with Vientiane (6–8 hr; 90,000 kip/$10/£6.95) and Luang Prabang (6–8 hr.; 85,000 kip/$9.85/£6.55). Route 7, a spur of the main north-south artery Route 13, begins 150km (93 miles) north of Vientiane; the road, once a contender for the world's worst, is now in great condition. The ridge-top scenery is spectacular, but buses are overcrowded and slow. The road is also prone to landslides, so ask travel agents and fellow travelers about current conditions before setting out. Private vehicle hire is costly, but the best choice.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

At **Sousath Travel**, adjoining Maly Guesthouse, a short ride south from the town center (✆ **061/312-031**; fax 061/312-395), the effusive Mr. Sousath is the definitive source on local history and a true steward of the jar sites; he has been featured in a number of local history and archaeology books and was in a documentary, *Ravens*, about the covert CIA pilots who flew from the area during the Vietnam War. A tour with Mr. Sousath himself, if you are so fortunate, is one of the town's most interesting activities. A car and driver can be arranged.

Diethelm Travel, on the main road in Phonsavan (✆ **061/211-118**; www.diethelmtravel.com), meets its usual high standards and can cater guided tours to any sights, local or remote.

Local guides will come and find you upon arrival or if you're wandering central Phonsavan. Make sure they have been certified by the government, be specific about the itinerary, and barter for price. Freelance guides usually charge about $30 (£20) for tour and transport.

For information on the ongoing unexploded ordinance (UXO) cleanup effort in Xieng Khouang, talk to the knowledgeable staff at the **Mines Advisory Group (MAG),** on the main road. MAG has been working in Laos since 1994 to clear the country of the deadly remnants of the U.S.'s "secret war" that continue to kill to this day.

Fast Facts Phonsavan

Currency Exchange There are a few foreign exchange counters on the main road (Rte. 7) near the central market, and **Lane Xang Bank** has a branch near the post office.

Internet Access Internet access is hard to come by, but there are a few spots where you can log on. Connections are of the dial-up variety, slow and prone to disconnecting in the middle of an e-mail. Patience is essential. Try **Hot Net**, near the main intersection, the cheapest in town at 18,000 kip per minute ($2.10/£1.40 per hour).

Budget accommodations line the main street (Rte. 7), and if you don't care to dine at your hotel, take a short stroll and you'll find a few good noodle and snack shops near the town center, **Sangha Restaurant** being the best. For Western dishes, stop by **Craters**, next door to the Mines Advisory Group and owned by an Australian expat who used to work for MAG.

Maly Hotel Owned and operated by local historian and raconteur Mr. Sousath, this is a good, low-luxe, but comfortable base for exploring the jars. Built pell-mell in a series of additions, the rooms vary and the decor runs the gamut from comfortable wooden lodge to musty cell. Ask to see your room before checking in. A few luxe setups have floor-to-ceiling windows and fine views. Bathrooms are guesthouse basic with fickle solar showers. Good Lao and Western food can be found in the popular lobby restaurant, whose walls are covered with land mines and various other objects of destruction. The staff is friendly and helpful, and the convenient offices of **Sousath Travel** are the best place in town to arrange for a guide. Don't miss any chance to chat with Mr. Sousath.

A short ride south from the town center, P.O. Box 649, Phonsavan. ✆ **061/312-031.** sousathp@laotel.com. 24 units. $8–$55 (£5.30–£37) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour service; car/jeep rental. *In room:* TV.

Vansana Plain of Jars Hotel ★ Perched on a hill just off the main road, the Vansana was voted "hotel number one" in my unofficial straw poll of Phonesavanians. Luxurious by local standards, the rooms are no-frills but clean. Standard units sport tile floors and balconies facing the town below. Suites are a good upgrade, with the extra $10 getting you a fireplace in the living area, a valuable addition during the winter months. The main drawback is the lack of an in-house travel agency for trips to the jars, but the town center is just a short stroll down the hill. A good choice.

Atop a hill northwest of the town center, Phonsavan. ✆ **061/213-170.** Fax 061/213-174. www.vansana hotel-group.com. 36 units. 400,000 kip ($46/£31) double; 500,000 kip ($58/£39) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; shuttle service; business center; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Thought to date back some 2,000 years, the archaeological finds at the **Plain of Jars** are stunning and mysterious. Hundreds of stone jars of varying sizes, the largest a bit more than 2.7m (9 ft.) high, cover a plateau stretching across 24km (15 miles). Jars have been found in 15 different sites in the area so far. A guide is required to visit these sites, and it's nice to have one around if only to allay any fears over land mines (all areas within the sites are safe, though) and to get some perspective on local history. You can cover the main sites in a day, but you might want to take a few days and explore the surrounding Hmong villages. **Na Sala**, a busy Hmong village, is a good destination. Be sure to go with a guide who can translate and make introductions.

Plain of Jars: Site 1 ★★ If you're short on time, this is the one to see. Set on a high hill is one of the largest of the jars, called the Doloman jar, amid a cockeyed collection of 300 jars. It's all quite surreal and a unique photo op; a visit here gives you a great perspective on the surrounding countryside. Burn scars still dot the area, and legend has it that a few enterprising members of the American military once tried to lift one of the jars with a helicopter and failed. This is the easiest site to access and the most picturesque.

11km (7 miles) from town, near Ban Hang Village. Admission 10,000 kip ($1.15/75p).

Plain of Jars: Sites 2 and 3 ★ These sites are both off the beaten track and require some fancy driving and a bit of picturesque rice-paddy and pasture walking to reach, but they are certainly worth it. Site 2 is situated near a small water fall and has some 60 jars

in a grove atop a small hill. Site 3 will have you crossing a bamboo bridge and picking your way through fields to get to open pasture on a high hill with some 100 jars.

Site 2 is 22km (14 miles) from town, and Site 3 is just a short drive from there. Both have admission fees of 10,000 kip ($1.15/75p) each.

9 THE FAR SOUTH: PAKSE & CHAMPASAK

South of Vientiane, Route 13 traces the Mekong River as it forms the border with Thailand. The river passes through Savannakhet, a French colonial outpost, and then Pakse, a midsize town, before reaching the wide Mekong flood plain, where the river spreads into hundreds of rivulets before cascading over dynamic **Phapheng Falls** to Cambodia. What brings many to this little-visited region is **Wat Phou**, a pre-Angkorian ruin on a hilltop overlooking the river near the town of **Champasak**. The city of **Pakse** is the best base for exploring, and there are some great new luxury options, like a multiday cruise on Luang Say's Wat Phou riverboat. **Si Phan Don**, in the far south, literally means "the 4,000 Islands." Here, the Mekong spreads out like the branches of a tree, and you'll find stunning waterfalls and quaint island towns such as **Don Khong**. The town of **Savannakhet** is a good stop for those connecting overland with Vientiane, and there are also some good rustic resorts such as those at Tad Lo, Saravan, and the Bolavan Plateau. Arranging a tour with Diethelm Travel (p. 214) or Exotissimo Travel (p. 214), even just for transport, is a good choice.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Lao Airlines** (✆ **021/212-051**; www.laoairlines.com) flies regularly from Vientiane to Pakse for 1,010,000 kip ($117/£78). The airport in Pakse is on the opposite side of the river from the main town. Tuk-tuks connect to town for 8,000 kip (90¢/60p) with bargaining.

BY BUS Buses connect from Vientiane via Savannakhet. The road is good thanks to the many new Japanese-funded bridges, but it's 2 long days of travel. It is 8 hours from Vientiane to Savannakhet and then up to 10 hours from Savannakhet to Pakse. It's worth a flight, even if just one-way.

Pakse is just a short ride from the Thai border and a few hours by bus from Ubon Ratchathani.

WHERE TO STAY

Accommodations choices are limited in the far south. **Champa Residence**, on Route 13, east of town in Ban Phonosath (✆ **031/212-120**), has tidy rooms in a former colonial from $30 (£20). The **Champasak Palace Hotel**, 1km (1/2 mile) east of town on Route 13 (✆ **031/212-263**), on the banks of the Se Don River, has rooms from $40 (£27). In the heart of town, **Hotel Pakse**, Street 5, Ban Watlouang (✆ **031/212-131**), has basic concrete rooms with air-conditioning and cable TV from $21 (£14).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Wat Phou ★★ Predating the temples of Angkor (sometime before the 9th c.), this stunning hilltop site is a highlight in Laos. Wat Phou was built in homage to the Hindu god Shiva, on grounds once used for animist worship. Some archaeologists posit that the temple is also homage to the Mekong and a copy of a similar site along the Ganges in India. The compound is symmetrical, with a broad causeway as the central axis and

Finds Luxury on the Mekong

The **Vat Phou Cruise** operated by the folks at **Luang Say Cruises** (✆ **021/215-958** in Vientiane; www.asian-oasis.com) is a 3-day, 2-night excursion between Pakse and the 4,000 Islands (Si Phan Don) in the far south. In high season, trips cost a whopping $528 (£352; $414/£276 in the low season) per person, but it's worth it. The boat is large and luxurious, with a top deck replete with quiet corners in which to relax and enjoy the passing scenery. Private staterooms are small but air-conditioned and comfortable. All trips begin in Pakse. Trips include stops at small villages, the unique pre-Angkorian ruins of Oum Muong, and, of course, the south's premier attraction, Wat Phou. The food is ample, guides are informative and professional, and service is very friendly.

expansive reflecting *barays*, or ponds, now gone dry, as flanks. The approach to the main temple site passes between two pavilions, crumbling but still grand, before ascending the steep central stair.

The upper level is the main sanctuary, which was converted to Buddhism in the 13th century and now houses nonhistoric Buddhist statues and an altar. The temple exterior is decorated in fine reliefs of Apsara, alluring mythical female dancers. The sanctuary was reportedly a site of human sacrifices from the pre–Wat Phou temple era. Today, in a ceremony conducted on the fourth day of the waxing moon in the sixth lunar month, a bull is ritually slaughtered by members of a nearby Mon-Khmer (an ethnic group closely related to the Khmer) tribe in honor of the founding father of the temple. The view of the surrounding Mekong basin is spectacular. Don't miss the spring at the base of the cliff behind the main temple. The water is thought sacred and visitors anoint themselves to receive a blessing.

There is a small museum at the entrance featuring artifacts from the original site. Wat Phou is best visited with a tour. Diethelm Travel (p. 214) and Exotissimo Travel (p. 214) can make any arrangements. The *wat* is also a stop on the **Vat Phou Cruise** (see above).

14km (8¾ miles) south west of Champasak; 45km (28 miles) from Pakse. Admission 30,000 kip ($3.45/£2.30). Daily 8am–4pm.

Vietnam

by Sherisse Pham

For many Westerners, Vietnam was a war. Now, though, it has come into itself as a destination, with beauty, idiosyncrasies, and a people longing to put Vietnam's many conflicts and occupations behind them. Its mountains, jungles, and coastlines range from virtually untouched to well groomed and welcoming, and the country now offers anything a traveler might hope for. Villages remain quaint and hospitable. Major cities are cosmopolitan but retain much of their old charm; a duck off a main street can lead a visitor down old stone corridors, into bustling markets, or through neighborhood enclaves with individual personalities. Ethnic hill tribes live much the way they always have, albeit with some finding themselves now melding into something not old, not new, but simply different. Where it might have once been said that Vietnam was struggling to put its past behind it, there is now plenty of evidence to say that it has finally succeeded. Even a short trip to this multifaceted country will confirm this.

Vietnam's more than 2,000 years of history was shaped by occupation: The Chinese, French, and Americans left a brutal imprint on the Vietnamese story, but also left a rich cultural footprint. Chinese and French food, language, and architecture have been assimilated smoothly into the already fascinating Vietnamese culture. An ancient Confucian university, a Zen monastery, a Buddhist temple built in the Hindu style, a Vietnamese puppet show, French country chalets, and gourmet restaurants—you'll find them all in Vietnam.

Vietnam claims 54 minority groups, mostly in rural, mountainous areas. The distinct clothing, language, and customs of each indigenous group present another side of the country entirely. The Kingdom of Cham, an Indian- and Khmer-influenced nation, also made what is present-day Vietnam its home from the 2nd through 18th centuries, leaving a stunning legacy of art and architecture.

This is a land of rich natural beauty. From plunging mountains and craggy limestone formations to dense jungles, vast river deltas, and pristine beaches, Vietnam's ecological treasures alone are worth a trip. Adventure- and outdoor-travel outfitters abound, and many visitors come to trek, bicycle, and paddle their ways to scenic serenity.

If you want to see the country's past in terms of its wars, you can easily do so. Many sights, such as the tunnel city of **Vinh Moc,** near **Hue;** crumbling pillboxes of the **DMZ** (demilitarized zone); or old Viet Cong hide-outs in the **Mekong Delta** or in the areas outside Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) serve as somber reminders of the past. American veterans and history buffs of all nationalities visit former bases and battle sites. The Vietnamese, though, have moved on; the sentiment is almost a public policy, and you'll hear it like a mantra. You might have a chance to talk about the wars on a casual basis with people, and some might even share their stories, but expect no recrimination.

Instead, the Vietnamese are going forward to establish their country as a strong

nation at peace. Since the inception of *doi moi,* the Communist Party's policy of loosening stringent economic restrictions and opening trade, Vietnam has enjoyed exponential growth. From the smallest northern village to the placid capital of **Hanoi** to frantic **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)** in the south, all are rushing for a slice of the pie. National infrastructure is improving, foreign investment flowing, and tourism booming. The central business districts rank with any in the world for quantity of glass and steel, and they're peopled by an increasing number of Western businesspeople. Expat residents bring along their pocketbooks and appetites, and local hotels and restaurants rise to the challenge.

Travel here is a breeze; English speakers are many and, though the touts are plenty, you'll have your pick of tour guides, ticket agents, and drivers. Vietnam's relatively good roadways and efficient, inexpensive air system—indeed, its very shape—put much of this small country within easy reach of the casual traveler. Vietnam also hosts an ever-expanding collection of affordable, luxury resorts.

So, whether you want to close a chapter on the past, experience a lively ancient culture, see beautiful countryside, get your adventure fix, or just enjoy a bit of beachside or cosmopolitan comfort, Vietnam has it all. Now is the time to go: The word is out, and the number of visitors is steadily swelling. Be sure to bring your camera—the whole country is a photo op on the go.

1 GETTING TO KNOW VIETNAM

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Vietnam is an S-shaped strip that borders China in the north, Laos in the west, and Cambodia in the southwest. Covering about 331,520 sq. km (129,293 sq. miles), it is roughly the size of Italy. It has a varied and lush topography, with two deltas, tropical forests, craggy mountains, rock formations, and a coastline that stretches for 3,260km (2,021 miles), much of it white-sand beaches. Vietnam also claims thousands of islands off its coast.

The Regions in Brief

THE NORTH The scenic northern highlands have craggy mountains hovering over sweeping green valleys. The inhabitants of the region are ethnic minorities and hill tribes, scratching out a living from subsistence farming and still somewhat isolated from civilization. Popular tourism destinations are **Sapa, Lao Cai, Son La,** and **Dien Bien Phu,** the former French military garrison. Vietnam's tallest mountain, Fansipan (3,143m/10,309 ft.), hovers over Sapa near the border with China in the northwest, part of the mountain range the French dubbed the "Tonkinese Alps." The **Red River Delta** lies to the east of the highlands. It is a triangular shape off the **Gulf of Tonkin,** an extension of the South China Sea. In the gulf is spectacular **Halong Bay,** 3,000 limestone formations jutting from still blue waters. South of the highlands but still in the northern region is **Hanoi,** Vietnam's capital city.

THE CENTRAL COAST To the east is the central coastline, location of major cities **Hue, Hoi An,** and **Danang.** Hue is Vietnam's former capital and Imperial City (1802–1945). Hoi An, a major trading port in the mid–16th century, still shows the architectural influences of the Chinese and Japanese traders who passed through and settled here, leaving buildings that are perfectly preserved. Danang, Vietnam's fourth-largest city, is a port town whose major attractions include the museum of Cham antiquities and nearby

CHINA
To Kunming
Red River
Railway
Nanning
CHINA
Lao Cai
Sapa
Lang Son
Lai Chau
Hoang Lien Mountains
Tam Dao
Thai Nguyen
Dong Dang
Son La
Hong Gai
Zhanjiang
Dien Bien Phu
Viet Tri
Hanoi
Cat Ba Nat'l Park
Sam Neua
Red River Delta
Haiphong
Nam Dinh
Luang Prabang
Ninh Binh
Thanh Hoa
Cuc Phuong National Park
Sam Son
Gulf of Tonkin
Hainan Island (CHINA)
Vinh
LAOS
Vientiane
Mekong
Tha Khaek
Dong Hoi
Former Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)
Vinh Moc
Dong Ha
Lao Bao
Khe Sahn
Hue
VIETNAM
Danang
Hoi An
THAILAND
My Lai (Son My)
Pakse
Quang Ngai
Kontum
Central Highlands
To Bangkok
Qui Nhon
Angkor
Pleiku
Battambang
Siem Reap
Tuy Hoa
Tonle Sap
CAMBODIA
Buon Ma Thuot
Nha Trang
Dalat
Cam Ranh Bay
Phnom Penh
Tay Ninh
Phan Rang
Moc Bai
Cu Chi
Bien Hoa
Phan Thiet
South China Sea
Chau Doc
Sihanoukville
Long Xuyen
Mytho
Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)
Ha Tien
Phu Quoc Island
Vung Tau
Rach Gia
Vinh Long
Cantho
Tien Giang River (Upper Mekong River)
Mekong Delta
Gulf of Thailand
Camau
Hau Giang River (Bassac River)
0
100 Mi
0
100 Km

Responsible Tourism

Tourists in Vietnam are a relatively new species, and it's important to respect local culture and try to minimize our impact on the country. Try to keep personal ideologies and political debate quiet. Vietnamese are proud of their triumph over outside threats, autonomy that came at a great cost in lives and suffering, and the doors are just opening after a long period of isolation (because of both external sanctions and internal policies). The common sentiment among Vietnamese, more than half of whom were born after the end of conflict with the United States, is to forget the past and push on into an ever brighter future, economically and socially. There are, however, many monuments to Vietnam's years of struggle. When visiting monuments to war—or one of the many sights that depict or revisit the years of struggle against the Chinese, French, or Americans—it's important to practice restraint. Refrain from jokes, try to go in smaller groups, and engage in debates or personal feelings in discreet tones or at a later time. In places such as **Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum** in Hanoi, the monument to the **My Lai Massacre** in central Vietnam, at the tunnels of **Cu Chi** and **Vinh Moch,** in the **Hanoi Hilton,** or in the **War Remnants Museum,** discretion is not only requested, it's often enforced (visitors have been known to receive actual hand slaps and barked orders at Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum).

Our strongest impact as visitors is through our money and how we spend it. Giving gifts in Vietnam, particularly to young people or the many who approach foreign visitors with calls of help, is a double-edged sword. Where it might gratify in the short term to help someone and fill a few outstretched hands with sweets or school supplies, it sets up a harmful precedent and props up the image of foreign visitors as walking ATMs. You will be followed and harried in Vietnam quite a bit, and in some areas, particularly Hanoi, the young book-and-postcard salesmen and touts are part of organized gangs and very

China Beach. Major flooding in the year 2000 caused immeasurable damage to the lowlands here.

THE SOUTH-CENTRAL COAST & HIGHLANDS The central highlands area is a temperate, hilly region occupied by many of Vietnam's ethnic minorities. Travelers are most likely to visit historic **Dalat,** a resort town nestled in the Lang Bien Plateau, established by the French at the turn of the 20th century as a recreation and convalescence center. On the coast is **Nha Trang,** Vietnam's preeminent sea resort.

THE MEKONG DELTA Farthest south, the Mekong Delta is a flat land formed by soil deposits from the Mekong River. Its climate is tropical, characterized by heat, high rainfall, and humidity. The delta's sinuous waterways drift past fertile land used for cultivating rice, fruit trees, and sugar cane. The lower delta is untamed swampland. The region shows the influences of ancient Funan and Khmer cultures, as well as the scars from war misery, particularly in battles with neighboring Cambodia. **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon),** Vietnam's largest cosmopolitan area, lies just past its northern peripheries.

persistent (although the hard sell has lessened with the increased number of tourists). Saying a polite but firm "No" to persistent hawkers goes a long way to alleviating the problem.

Among **Vietnam's ethnic minorities** in the Central Highlands and the far north, be most careful about your impact. These communities are on the fringes of Vietnamese culture, distinct enclaves where ancient practices of animistic faiths still hold sway. Photographers should be sure to ask before snapping portraits or images of ceremonial sights; increasingly, asking for permission to photograph is met with pleas for money, but say "No" and move on. It's important not to assault locals with a camera, however uniquely attired and exotic they may be. Gifts of clothes or medicines might seem helpful but only diminish already-eroding ancient cultures and customs. Learn about these people and their traditions as much as you can before traveling among them. Keep an open mind and be ready to learn, not teach. Below are a few good guidelines for environmental and cultural stewardship:

Don't litter: Sounds simple, but in a country where you will rarely find a public trash receptacle (most things are discarded on the street and swept up en masse), it is difficult. On rural hiking trails or in national parks, tie a garbage bag to the outside of your pack and pick up wrappers along the way. Don't preach, but if locals ask what you are doing—and they certainly will—explain that you are keeping the park clean and that it is something that anyone can do.

Wherever possible, try to **support the local economy**—eat at local joints, buy essentials such as bottled water and soap at small mom-and-pop shops, and even try public transport (if you are a hearty soul). Don't buy any animal products, such as snake wines or lizard-skin bags, and try to find out if souvenirs are produced locally.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Vietnam began in the Red River Valley, around the time of the 3rd century b.c., with a small kingdom of Viet tribes called Au Lac. The tiny kingdom was quickly absorbed into the Chinese Qin Dynasty in 221 b.c., but as that dynasty crumpled, it became part of a new land called Nam Viet, ruled by a Chinese commander. In 111 b.c., it was back to China again, this time as part of the Han empire. It remained part of greater China for the next thousand years or so. The Chinese form of writing was adopted (to be replaced by a Roman alphabet in the 17th c.), Confucianism was installed as the leading ideology, and Chinese statesmen became the local rulers. Few effectively challenged Chinese rule, with the exception of a nobleman's two daughters, the Trung sisters, who led a successful but short-lived revolt in a.d. 39.

In a.d. 939, the Chinese were finally thrown out and the Vietnamese were left to determine their own destiny under a succession of dynasties. The kingdom flourished and strengthened, enough for the Vietnamese to repel the intrusion of Mongol invaders under Kublai Khan from the north, and armies from the kingdom of Champa from

Danang and the east, in the mid–13th century. Gathering strength, Vietnam gradually absorbed the Champa empire and continued to move south, encroaching upon Khmer land, taking the Mekong Delta and almost extinguishing the Khmer as well. There followed a brief period of Chinese dominance in the early 1400s, but the biggest risk to the country's stability was to come from the inside.

Torn between rival factions in court, the country split along north-south lines in 1545; the north followed the Le Dynasty, while the south followed the Nguyen. The country was reunited under Emperor Gia Long in 1802, but by the 1850s, the French, already settled and on the prowl in Indochina, launched an offensive that resulted in the Vietnamese accepting protectorate status 3 decades later.

Although the French contributed greatly to Vietnamese infrastructure, the proud people of Vietnam bridled under colonial rule. In 1930, revolutionary Ho Chi Minh found fertile ground to establish a nationalist movement. As in China, World War II and occupation by the Japanese in 1940 helped fuel the movement by creating chaos and nationalist fervor. Upon the retreat of the Japanese, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam an independent nation in August 1945.

The French did not agree, however, and the two sides fought bitterly until 1954. The French, having lost a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu, agreed to a cease-fire at the Geneva Convention that year. The two sides determined that the country would be split north and south at the 17th Parallel, with the Viet Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam) having control of the north and the French supporters having control of the south. Elections were to be held in 2 years to determine who would lead a new, unified Vietnam.

Because of resistance to the American-supported regime in the south, led by Ngo Dinh Diem, the elections were never held. The communists continued to gain power, and Diem was assassinated, putting the southern regime in peril. Finally, in 1965, American president Lyndon Johnson dispatched the first American combat troops to Danang to prop up the south. The Soviet Union and China weighed in with assistance to the north. The rest is history. After a decade of heavy fighting that took 58,000 American lives and as many as four million Vietnamese lives, the communists took Saigon on April 30, 1975. In 1976, north and south were officially reunited. Rather than enjoying the newfound peace, Vietnam invaded Cambodia after border skirmishes in 1978. China, friend of Cambodia, then invaded Vietnam in 1979.

In the mid-1980s, Vietnam began moving toward *doi moi,* a free-market policy, to save itself from bankruptcy. To further ingratiate itself with the international community, it withdrew its army from Cambodia in 1989, and as the 1990s began, the country began opening to the world. It reorganized its economy toward a market-oriented model, sought diplomatic relations, and in 1991 signed a peace agreement with Cambodia. In 1994, America capitulated and lifted its long-standing trade embargo against Vietnam, and the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1995. Vietnam also joined ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

VIETNAM TODAY

The modern portrait of this once-troubled land is rosy. Today, Vietnam is the world's third-largest rice exporter, and the country is tentatively finding its way in the global economy. Normalization of ties between the U.S. and Vietnam in 1995 was followed by a series of ongoing resolutions and agreements contingent upon Vietnamese complicity with international human-rights and trade standards. President Clinton visited the reunified country in

2000, the first U.S. president since Richard Nixon in 1969, and Vietnam is now a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld met with Vietnam's defense minister in Washington in 2003, and the USS *Vandergrift* pulled into port in Ho Chi Minh City at about the same time, the first U.S. navy ship to dock in a Vietnamese port since hasty withdrawal in 1975. In 2008 we witnessed an official exchange between the top leaders of the U.S. and Vietnam for the fourth year in a row when President Bush welcomed Prime Minister Nguyen Tran Dung to the Oval Office. Telling signs.

The road has not always been smooth, however: Pell-mell growth in certain industries—catfish and shrimp hatcheries, for example—circumvents international standards, disrupting markets and raising U.S. ire; and continued reports of humanitarian violations are under close international scrutiny.

Per-capita income in Vietnam is estimated at a meager $832 (£555) per person, but increases steadily each year, especially in urban centers. Rural poverty and lack of good medical services are still major problems. Vietnam hosted the Asian Games in 2003, putting its best foot forward in what was a coup for international opinion. Recent international airline agreements and new direct flights to the U.S. and Europe signify further international cooperation. As a stable, safe, rapidly developing nation, Vietnam appeals to travelers of all tastes and budgets.

VIETNAM'S PEOPLE & CULTURE

Vietnam has a cultural landscape as varied and colorful as its topography. The Viet ethnic group is well in the majority, comprising about 88% of the population, but there are 54 other minority ethnic groups, many of whom are hill tribes living in villages largely untouched by modern civilization.

Though Vietnam has rushed into modernization over the past several years, the economy has remained largely agrarian, with farmers, fishermen, and forestry workers accounting for 73% of the workforce and most of the population still residing in small villages. The Vietnamese have a strong sense of family and of community, and are accustomed to close human contact and far-reaching interrelationships. This might be one of the reasons why, despite centuries of occupation by foreigners, Vietnamese cultural traditions have survived. Moreover, outsiders are still welcomed. Americans, in fact, will get a wide smile and a thumbs up, although the reception is better in the south than in the north.

RELIGION Approximately 70% of all Vietnamese are Buddhists, mainly Mahayana practitioners of Chinese influence (see "Buddha & Buddhism in Southeast Asia," p. 26). About 10% are Catholics, and the rest are Confucianists, animists (believing in gods of nature), or followers of the unique Vietnamese religion Cao Dai (see the listing on the Cao Dai Holy See Temple, p. 384), an interesting combination of the major world faiths. Islam and Protestantism also have small pockets of believers. While we're on the topic of -isms, it's hard for the casual observer to see any observance of communism at all, other than the prevalence of state-owned entities and the bureaucratic hoops you might have to jump through.

CUISINE Each region has its specialties, but the hallmarks of Vietnamese food are light, fresh ingredients, heavy on the rice, pork, and fish, with garnishes such as mint, coriander, fish sauce, and chile pepper. Two of the local dishes you're most likely to encounter are *pho,* a noodle soup in a clear broth, and *bun cha,* fresh rice noodles with barbecued pork in sauce. Chinese-influenced dishes can be found, including hot pot, a cook-your-own group activity in which fresh vegetables and chunks of meat and fowl are

dipped into boiling broth and then consumed. The French have left their mark as well: Along with excellent restaurants, you'll find espresso and crusty French bread on every street corner.

THE ARTS Ancient, distinctive Vietnamese art forms remain today, like **water puppetry,** with wooden hand puppets actually dancing across water, and *cheo,* traditional **folk opera.** There is an emerging interest in fine arts, with countless galleries in almost every major Vietnamese city, and an emphasis on traditional techniques such as lacquer and silk painting and wood blocking. Vietnamese **music,** using string and woodwind instruments, bamboo xylophones, and metal gongs, is delicate, distinctive, and appealing. **Literature** has existed since the forming of the nation in folklore, proverbs, and idioms singular to each village and ethnic group, and passed down from century to century. Many of the old tales have been translated and printed in books that you can easily find in foreign-language bookstores.

ETIQUETTE Although the Vietnamese are generally tolerant of foreign ways, they dress very modestly. Foreigners wearing hot pants or displaying navels, chests, or shoulders will attract stares. Swimsuit thongs and nude beach bathing are out of the question. Some temples flatly refuse to admit persons in shorts, and some smaller towns such as Hoi An post signs asking tourists to dress "appropriately," which means you might have a run-in with the police if you don't.

LANGUAGE The ancient Vietnamese language, though not complex structurally, is tonal and therefore difficult for many Westerners to master. In its earliest written form, it was based on the Chinese pictographic writing forms—you'll see remnants of that tradition on temple walls—but in the 17th century, a French scholar developed the Roman alphabet that is used today. Unlike other Asian countries, it looks like you can read this stuff, but the system of accent marks is quite involved. Today, most city dwellers seem to speak at least a little English, the older generation speaks some French, and, with growing influence from China (the Chinese comprise more than 50% of all visitors here), younger people are increasingly studying Mandarin. Students especially will be eager to practice English with you. Solo travelers, being less intimidating, are at an advantage; they'll get many opportunities (and invitations) to have a squat on a street corner, drink a "Bia Hoi" (beer Hoi), and meet people.

Useful Vietnamese Phrases

English	Vietnamese	Pronunciation
Hello	**Xin chao**	Seen chow
Goodbye	**Tam biet**	Tam bee-et
Thank you	**Cam on**	Cahm un
You're welcome	**Khong co gi**	Kawng koe gee
Yes	**Vang**	Vahng
No	**Khong**	Kawng
Excuse me	**Xin loi**	Seen loy
I don't understand	**Toi khong hieu**	Toy kawng hew
When?	**Luc nao?**	Look now?
Where is . . . ?	**O dau . . . ?**	Er dow . . . ?
drinking water	**nuoc khoang**	nook kwang
hotel	**khach san**	kak san

r estaurant	**nha hang** nya	hahng
toilet	**nha ve sinh**	nya vay shin
Turn right	**Re phai** Ray	fie
Turn left	**Re trai** Ray	chrai
How much?	**Bao nhieu?** B	augh nyew?
I need a doctor	**Toi can bac si**	Toy cahn back see

2 THE BEST OF VIETNAM IN 2 WEEKS

Vietnam's serpentine cur ve along the S outh China S ea is the per fect shape for a linear trip that starts in Hanoi and ends in Ho Chi Minh City, often called by its prewar name, Saigon. Vietnam encompasses the cultur es of mor e than 50 ethnic gr oups, was r uled by both the Chinese and the F rench, and is the pr ototypical Indochinese country. That's a lot to take in.

Days ❶–❷: Hanoi ★

Stay in a guest r oom in the old wing of the **Sofitel Metropole.** The hotel is a shor t ride or walk fr om the **Old Quarter,** which y ou can explor e b y foot or b y cy clo pedicab . Reserve your sleeper berth on a night train to Lao Cai and S apa for the next night. Then stretch your legs with a walk ar ound **Hoan Kiem Lake** and end your first ev ening with dinner at **Restaurant Bobby Chinn,** on the southwest corner of the lake. Spend the next day exploring H anoi's attractions—the **Ho Chi M inh M useum and M ausoleum,** the **Vietnam N ational M useum of F ine Ar ts,** the **Hoa Lo Prison**—and grabbing lunch at **Quan An Ngon,** wher e many local dishes are on offer. Take an early dinner at **Club de L'Oriental,** the city 's ne west and tastiest upscale Vietnamese r estaurant. Thus for ti-fied, board your night train.

Days ❸–❹: Sapa ★★★

You'll arriv e befor e dawn at the bor der town of Lao Cai; fr om there, take a mini-van to S apa, a hub of hill-tribe (and tour-ist) activity in the Tonkinese Alps. S tay at the **Topas E co-Lodge,** 18km (11 miles) out of tow n. Rest in the morning, tr ek in the afternoon, and spend the ev ening relaxing at the simple, gr een resort, which overlooks a quiet, plunging valley of jungle and terraced rice fields. The next morning, go trekking with a guide and learn about different minority tribes along the way . Catch the return night train to H anoi.

Day ❺: Transit to Halong Bay

If y ou plan it right, y ou can arriv e in Hanoi in the early morning and be on your way to H along Bay not long after.

Days ❻–❼: Halong Bay ★★

The spir es and co ves of H along B ay can best be experienced aboar d the r eplica French junk ***Halong J asime.*** S wim (but watch out for the jellyfish!), watch the sun set from the top deck, and fall asleep to the lull of the sea.

Days ❽–❾: Hue ★★

Return to H anoi to catch an ev ening flight to Hue, the old imperial capital. S tay at **La Résidence,** an Art Deco gem with an excel-lent r estaurant, **Le Parfum.** D ine here, on the edge of the P erfume Riv er, and r elax with a spa tr eatment or nighttime dip in the pool. The city has a dish named after it, *bun bo H ue,* so be sur e to sample this during your stay. Spend your second day exploring the walled **Citadel** and **Imperial C ity** by foot and the **tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors** by boat. O r make a trip to the **DMZ (demilitariz ed zone)** of the Ameri-can war (the Vietnam War).

Days ⑩–⑪: Hoi An

Take an early morning bus to Hoi An, which features the southern stretches of **China Beach** and the UNESCO World Heritage Site **old town.** The **Hoi An Riverside Resort** is a good bet, located at equal distances from both the beach and the town, making getting to either a pleasant bike ride. Schedule your trip to coincide with a full moon in order to see the city's **lantern festivals.** Take a quick evening flight to Saigon.

Days ⑫–⑬: Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) ★★

Saigon is Vietnam's most chaotic city; come here for cosmopolitan buzz mixed with nostalgia for the city's past, typified in design by the new **Park Hyatt,** where you can grab dinner or drinks at any of the hotel's venues. Spend your first day on the must-sees: the **Vietnam History Museum;** the **War Remnants Museum;** and **Cholon,** the Chinese district. Have a drink or snack on the rooftop bar of the **Majestic** or the **Rex**—either will give you a feel for long-gone Saigon. On your second day, take a tour of the **Mekong Delta,** try Vietnamese *pho* from any street vendor, and cap off your travels at the **Q Bar,** in the old opera house.

Day ⑭: Return to Hanoi

A daytime flight back to Hanoi will put you on track for a flight home in the evening. Sleep on the plane—you'll have earned the rest.

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO VIETNAM

VISITOR INFORMATION

Vietnam's national tourism administration has a fairly good website at **www.vietnamtourism.com**, but it's more bureaucracy than information. It operates mainly through state-run tourism agencies, **Saigontourist** (www.saigon-tourist.com) and **Hanoi Tourism** (hanoitourism.com.vn), which have offices all over Vietnam and provide comprehensive tours and booking services. For more online info, click on "Vietnam" at the Mekong subregion's cross-referenced site, **www.visit-mekong.com**. Also check out the **Friends of Vietnam Heritage,** in Hanoi (✆ **04/3942-0737;** www.fvheritage.googlepages.com), which supports cultural events and programs.

The website of the Vietnam Embassy in the U.S., **www.vietnamembassy-usa.org**, is very helpful. Below are the Vietnam embassy and consulate locations overseas.

- **In the U.S.:** 1233 20th St. NW, Ste. 400, Washington, DC 20036 (✆ **202/861-0737;** fax 202/861-0917; www.vietnamembassy-usa.org); 866 United Nations Plaza, Ste. 435, New York, NY 10017 (✆ **212/644-0594;** fax 212/644-5732); or 1700 California St., Ste. 430, San Francisco, CA 94109 (✆ **415/922-1577;** fax 415/922-1848; www.vietnamconsulate-sf.org).
- **In Canada:** 470 Wilbrod St., Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6M8 (✆ **613/236-0772;** fax 613/236-2704).
- **In the U.K.:** 12–14 Victoria Rd., London W8-5RD (✆ **0207/937-1912;** fax 0207/937-6108).
- **In Australia:** 6 Timbarra Crescent, Malley, Canberra, ACT 2606 (✆ **2/6286-6059;** fax 2/6286-4534); or 489 New South Head Rd., Double Bay, Sydney, NSW 2028 (✆ **02/9327-2539;** fax 02/9328-1653).
- **In Thailand:** 82/1 Wireless Rd., Bangkok 10500 (✆ **251-7202** or 251-5835; fax 251-7201 or 251-7203).

Tours for Vietnam Veterans

U.S. veterans are returning to Vietnam—some to see how the story ended, others to stage memorial services, find closure by crossing the 17th Parallel, or just experience Vietnamese culture this time around.

Tours of Peace (**TOP; ✆ 520/326-0901**), a nonprofit organization started by Jess DeVaney, a retired U.S. Marine, runs tours where veterans not only come to terms with their past by visiting important sights in the Mekong Delta and the DMZ (among others), but also participate in the future. The folks at TOP believe that through helping others, we heal ourselves, so humanitarian aid projects are part of every tour. Financial assistance is available. Check www.topvietnamveterans.org, or write to TOP Vietnam Veterans, 7400 N. Oracle Rd., Ste. 100-W, Tucson, AZ 85704.

Another popular veterans' tour operator is **Nine Dragons Tours** (P.O. Box 24105, Indianapolis, IN 46224-0105; **✆ 317/329-0350;** www.nine-dragons.com).

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Residents of the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. need both a passport and prearranged visa to enter Vietnam. A single-entry tourist visa lasts for 30 days and costs $65 (£43); $150 (£100) will get you a multiple-entry visa for 90 days. You'll pay a bit more through an agent, but will save yourself some paper shuffling (it can be done for a nominal fee at any travel agent in Bangkok). Getting a visa takes 5 to 7 days for processing. Applicants must submit an application, a passport, and two passport photos. Tourist visas can be extended twice, each time for 30 days (best done through a travel agent). Multiple-entry business visas are valid for up to 3 months, but require a sponsor in Vietnam. Visas are good for any legal port of entry. ***Note:*** The visa begins on the date that you specify on your application.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

If you're entering the country as a tourist, you do not need to declare any items for personal use. You must declare cash in excess of $3,000 (£2,000) or the equivalent. You can also import 200 cigarettes, 2 liters of alcohol, and perfume and jewelry for personal use. Antiques are forbidden from export.

MONEY

The official currency of Vietnam is the **dong (VND),** which comes in notes of 500,000, 200,000, 100,000, 50,000, 10,000, 5,000, 1,000, 500, and 200VND. At press time, the exchange rate was **17,716 Vietnamese dong = $1.** The U.S. dollar is used as an informal second currency, and most items that cost more than a few dollars are priced in the greenback. Prices in this guide are listed as they are quoted, in either U.S. dollars or Vietnam dong.

ATMS Tourist areas have ATMs that dispense cash in Vietnam dong.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE You can exchange currency at banks in any city. Every hotel, no matter how small, will also change money at a slightly lower rate (or charge a small

commission). Don't accept torn or very grubby bills. A service charge of anywhere between $1 and $4 (65p–£2.65) will be levied.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Banks everywhere can cash traveler's checks in U.S., Canadian, and Australian dollars or pounds sterling. Vendors and retailers usually don't accept traveler's checks, however.

CREDIT CARDS Credit cards are accepted at major hotels, in upmarket restaurants, by tour operators, in most big Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City outlets, and increasingly outside these two major cities as well. Any Vietcombank branch, as well as big foreign banks, will handle credit card cash advances.

To report lost or stolen credit cards, call the nearest branch of **Vietcombank.** Otherwise, you can go to a post office to place a collect call to the card's international toll-free collect number for cash and a card replacement. The following international numbers are operational 24 hours: **Visa** Global Customer Assistance Service (✆ **410/581-3836**) and **MasterCard** Global Services (✆ **314/542-7111**). Note that foreigners aren't permitted to make collect calls, so you'll have to get a local to assist you. Or you can use AT&T, whose access number in Vietnam is ✆ **1/201-0288.** For **American Express,** visit or call the nearest representative, listed later in "Fast Facts: Vietnam."

WHEN TO GO

September through April are the peak months, but with a range of climatic variation in the different regions of the country, there are always areas of Vietnam where you can find favorable weather.

CLIMATE Vietnam's climate varies greatly from north to south. The north has four distinct seasons, with a chilly but not freezing winter from November to April. Summers are warm and wet. The south (which means Nha Trang on down) has hot, humid weather throughout the year, with temperatures peaking March through May into the 90s Fahrenheit (30s Celsius). The south has a monsoon season from April to mid-November. Vietnam is also affected by weather to the east, bearing the brunt of Pacific typhoons, especially August through September.

If you follow a south-north or north-south sweep, you might want to avoid both the monsoons and heat in the south by going sometime between November and February. If you're planning a beach vacation, however, keep in mind that the surf on the south-central coast (China Beach, Nha Trang) is too rough for watersports from October through March (but brings out the windsurfers in droves). Dalat, a hill station in central Vietnam, stays cool all year; and Sapa, in the far north, is at some altitude and gets quite chilly. Otherwise, prepare for heat.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS Public holidays are **New Year's Day** (Jan 1); **Tet/Lunar New Year,** the 4-day state holiday that falls between late January and mid-February; **Saigon Liberation Day** (Apr 30); **International Labour Day** (May 1); and **National Day of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam** (Sept 2). Government offices and tourist attractions are closed at these times.

While **Tet,** the Lunar New Year, is Vietnam's biggest holiday, it's very much a family-oriented time, something like American Thanksgiving. Folks travel far to get home for some of mom's cooking. Beginning on the evening exactly 3 days from the Lunar New Year and lasting for 4 days, much of the country closes down, including stores, restaurants, and museums, and accommodations may be difficult to find.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS Your biggest safety precaution is to take care with food. Drink only bottled or boiled water, without ice. Wash your hands often. And follow the old adage: Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it.

You will need to get special vaccinations if rural areas are on your itinerary. The following vaccinations are important for Vietnam: **hepatitis A** or **immune globulin (IG)** and **typhoid.** Injections for **Japanese encephalitis** are recommended if you plan to visit rural areas during the rainy season, as well as **rabies** in rural areas where you might be exposed to wild animals. You should also consider booster doses for **tetanus-diphtheria, measles,** and **polio.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, travelers in Vietnam should take an oral prophylaxis for **malaria** if traveling extensively in rural parts; malaria is not a problem anywhere in the Red River Delta, in coastal areas north of Nha Trang, nor in any of the major cities: Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Hanoi, Haiphong, Nha Trang, or Danang. Consult a physician, but the common recommendations for malarial preventative are as follows: atovaquone/proguanil (Malarone), doxycycline, mefloquine (Larium), or primaquine in special circumstances. Side effects abound, so be sure to discuss with a medical professional and follow any treatment regimen to the letter. The best prevention is to cover exposed skin and use an insect repellent that contains DEET (diethylmethyltoluamide).

See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for more information on the major health issues that affect travelers to Southeast Asia.

SAFETY CONCERNS Vietnam is a safe destination, but take heed of the following: First, the traffic is deadly, so be cautious when crossing the street anywhere; in big cities, pedestrians cross in groups and, if alone, wade out into the street and maintain a steady pace. Second, women should play it safe and avoid going out alone late at night. Third, and most important, beware of unexploded mines when hiking or exploring, especially through old war zones such as the DMZ or My Son. Don't stray off an established path, and don't touch anything you might find lying on the ground. Before you depart, you may want to check with your home country's overseas travel bureau or with the **U.S. State Department** (click "Travel Warnings" at **www.travel.state.gov**) to keep abreast of travel advisories and current affairs that could affect your trip.

Violent crime isn't common in Vietnam, but petty thievery, especially against tourists, is a risk. Pickpocketing is rampant, and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), in particular, has a special brand of drive-by purse snatching via motorbike. Don't wear flashy jewelry or leave valuables in your hotel room, especially in smaller hotels. There are small-time rackets perpetrated against tourists by taxi and cyclo drivers, usually in the form of a dispute on the agreed-upon price after you arrive at your destination. Or else the driver doesn't seem to have change. Simply agree on a price by writing it down first, and always smile and demand change.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE A cooperative treaty between the U.S. and Vietnam means that there are now direct flights between the two ex-enemies. **United Airlines** flies from the U.S. West Coast, and promotional rates are now available.

Most travelers connect to Vietnam via Bangkok, Hong Kong, Taipei, or Tokyo. See the "Getting There" section (p. 45) in chapter 3 for more international flight tips. **Malaysia Airlines, Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways,** and **EVA Air** fly regular routes from the big hubs. **Vietnam Airlines** connects Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh

Tips Have You Hugged Your Taxi Driver Today?

"Motorbike? Motorbike? Where you go?" You'll hear it on every street corner in most cities, the relentless pleas of the motorbike-taxi drivers. These guys drive like maniacs, but, especially for the individual traveler, there is no better way to get around any town in Vietnam. They're called Honda Om in Vietnamese, with Om meaning "hug"—thus, it's really a "hugging taxi." These huggers will, after bargaining, take you on a short ride at rates starting from 10,000VND (55¢/35p), or $2 (£1.30) per hour. Thanks to a recent law, helmets are now widely used. But don't be afraid to tap the guy's shoulder and give a "slow-down" hand signal.

City) with Vientiane, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Manila.

Reconfirmation for flights 72 hours before departure from Vietnam is a must. The 20,000VND ($1.15/75p) airport domestic departure tax and 200,000VND ($11/£7.50) departure tax for international flights are usually included in ticket prices.

BY BUS From Laos, it is possible to enter Vietnam overland via a bus ride from Savannakhet in the south. It's 520km (324 miles) to Danang ($27/£18) or 405km (251 miles) to Hue ($22/£15). Buses leave at midnight. In Laos, contact **Savanbanhao Tourist Co.** (✆ **041/212-202**). The overnight is long and bumpy, and the road often washes out in rainy season, so be sure to ask around first.

BY BOAT Convenient boat service now connects Vietnam with neighboring Cambodia by way of one of the larger tributaries of the Mekong between Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, and the Mekong Delta border town Chau Doc. The trip takes all day and costs $15 (£10). Contact the **Capitol Guesthouse** (✆ **023/217-627**), Cambodia's budget travel cafe, or make more luxury arrangements on a private outboard speedboat with the **Victoria Chau Doc Hotel** (✆ **076/865-010;** www.victoriahotels-asia.com). Be sure to have a prearranged Vietnam visa. The trip takes from morning until late afternoon, depending on water level and weather, and is an interesting adventure with great perspective on Indochine river life.

GETTING AROUND

The large number of tour operators—from big, inefficient government operations to slick, high-end tour companies and on down to the many budget tourist cafes—means that getting around Vietnam is quite easy. Stay with well-established agencies or the recommendations listed under "Visitor Information" in each section of this chapter. Before booking any kind of transport, be sure to confirm details: meal inclusions, air-conditioning, and so on.

BY PLANE **Vietnam Airlines** is the country's only domestic air carrier, but prices are reasonable and the service is good. Seats are usually easy to come by if you book a few days in advance. Purchasing tickets is also very easy; all travel agents book for a nominal fee, and many major hotels have V.A. agents in the lobby.

BY TRAIN Vietnam's major rail network runs from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and back, with stops in Hue, Danang, and Nha Trang. To give you an idea of timing, from Hanoi all the way to Saigon takes 34 hours on the express train; from

Hanoi to Hue is about 14 hours on an overnight express. The train is an interesting way to get around, although not much cheaper than flying. Soft-sleeper berths and special tourist cars are available on most routes and are worth the upgrade. Hard-sleeper berths are a good value, but you're stacked three high and cannot sit when the bunks are down. Air-conditioning will cost more per ticket, but is definitely worth it.

It's not difficult to buy tickets at any station, but most hotels and tour agencies will gladly simplify the process and arrange tickets for you for only a nominal fee (check each section of this chapter for contacts). Try **Ratraco,** Vietnam's rail-tour provider (just across from the station: 95–97 Le Duan St., 2nd floor, Hanoi; ✆ **04/3942-2889;** ratraco@hn.vnn.vn), or book through any travel agent. If you're going from Hanoi to Lao Cai (Sapa) near the China border, be sure to check out the new luxury cars on the ***Victoria Express,*** run by the **Victoria Sapa Resort** (✆ **20/871-522;** www.victoriahotels-asia.com). See "Getting There" in specific destination sections for more info.

BY BUS/MINIVAN Public buses are recommended to only the most intrepid travelers. Local transport is slow, crowded, and prone to break down.

Begun as small storefronts making arrangements for early backpackers in the 1990s, Vietnamese **tourist cafes** are the best option for seat-in-coach tours. Now franchised, with offices dotting the country, these convenient outfits run **open-tour bus tickets** that connect all the major points: Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Dalat, Phan Thiet, Nha Trang, Hoi An, Danang (optional), Hue, and Hanoi. You can travel in either direction, north to south or vice versa, for under $30 (£20). The buses leave at set times (most in the morning, though a few overnights are possible); you just decide the day before if you want to be on one. This gives you tremendous freedom to plan your own itinerary. In recent years, **Sinh Café,** which now has computerized reservations services, has really beat out the pack, but all of the cafes match prices and often consolidate services. **A–Z Queen Café, Kim Café,** and **TM Brothers** (in the south) all have comparable service. Check "Visitor Information & Tours" in the destination sections that follow.

BY CAR For safety (and sanity) in Vietnam, it is best to rent a car only with a hired driver. Rates are reasonable, making this a good way to see things outside urban centers or to take a 1-day city tour of major sights. All major hotels and travel agents can arrange rental.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Vietnam is gaining in popularity among travelers and tourists, so book early, especially during the high season of November and December; accommodations ranging from the glitziest five-stars to the grungiest guesthouses are often booked up and are able to demand high rates. Always ask about seasonal reductions or promotional rates; low-season discounts can be as high as 50%. ***Note:*** A 20% VAT was instituted for hotels and restaurants in 1999, but expect variation in how it's followed. Some establishments might

Tips Smoker's Paradise

There is no such thing as "nonsmoking" in Vietnam. Only top-end restaurants serving Western cuisine are likely to have a nonsmoking section, and even then it's unlikely that there will be any partition or distance to contain the fumes. Some hotels offer nonsmoking guest rooms or floors. Inquire when booking, especially at hotels popular with business travelers, as the rooms can get pretty musty.

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Vietnam:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Vietnam's country code **(84),** the city or local area code (**4** for Hanoi, **8** for Ho Chi Minh City, **54** for Hue, **511** for Danang, **510** for Hoi An, **63** for Dalat, **58** for Nha Trang), and the phone number (for example, 011 84 4 000-0000).
- **To place a call within Vietnam:** Dial the city or area code preceded by a **0** (the way numbers are listed in this book), and then the local number (for example, 04 000-0000). Note that not all phone numbers have seven digits after the city code.
- **To place a direct international call from Vietnam:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Laos, 856; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1.

add the full 20%, while others might charge as little as 10%, and still others will ignore it entirely. Be sure to inquire.

TIPS ON DINING

Many of the world's finest culinary traditions are represented in Vietnam, including French, Chinese, Japanese, and, of course, Vietnamese. Local French cuisine is affordable and authentic. There are some interesting new upscale Vietnamese food venues, but ask locals where to eat, and you'll get a blanket recommendation for the local market or street stalls. Regardless of whether you are with locals or at high-end eateries, try local delicacies such as *bun bo* (cold rice noodles with fried beef), *banh khoi* (crispy thin rice-based crepes filled with chopped meat and shrimp), and *chao* (rice porridge with garnishes of meat, egg, or chiles). Note that many upscale places levy a 10% government tax plus a 5% service charge; some places might absorb the tax in their prices, while others add the full 20% VAT, which was instituted in 1999.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

Bring an empty suitcase—or buy one in-country for peanuts. Vietnam offers fabulous bargains on silk, as both fabric and made-to-order clothing, as well as lacquerware, silver, and fine art. Hanoi is probably best for most buys, particularly paintings; save the lacquerware and home furnishings for Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Furthermore, all prices are negotiable except for those in the most upscale shops; the more relentless bargainers can walk away with incredible deals on some unique finds.

In 2004, Vietnam committed to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, a consortium of more than 150 nations working together to protect international copyright. Any stroll through a local market will tell you that this pledge is

a tall order. Vietnamese have long followed the socialist ideal that all intellectual property—literary, artistic, or scientific—benefits the collective and should be shared; in fact, copying, under the communist regime, was encouraged. Today, this means rampant pirating of CDs and DVDs for resale. The tide is slowly turning, however, and Customs checks (upon return to Western countries) are increasingly sensitive to pirated material.

Fast Facts Vietnam

American Express Amex is represented by **Exotissimo Travel** (in Hanoi at 26 Tran Nhat Duat St.; ✆ **04/828-2150;** in Ho Chi Minh City at **Exotissimo,** Saigon Finance Center, 9 Dinh Tien Hoang St., 4th Floor, District 1; ✆ **08/825-1723**). ***Be warned:*** It does not provide complete travel services, but can direct you if you lose your card. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm.

Business Hours Vendors and restaurants tend to be all-day operations, opening at about 8am and closing at 9 or 10pm. Government offices, banks, travel agencies, and museums are usually open from 8 to 11:30am and 2 to 4pm.

Drug Laws Possessing drugs can mean a jail sentence, and selling them or possessing quantities in excess of 300 grams means a death sentence. Don't take any chances.

Electricity Vietnam's electricity carries 220 volts, so if you're coming from the U.S., bring a converter and adapter. Plugs have either two round prongs or two flat prongs. If you're toting a laptop, bring a surge protector as well. Big hotels will have all these implements.

Embassies **U.S.:** 7 Lang Ha St., Ba Dinh District, Hanoi (✆ **04/850-5000;** http://vietnam.usembassy.gov). **Canada:** 31 Hung Vuong St., Ba Dinh District, Hanoi (✆ **04/734-5000;** http://geo.international.gc.ca/asia/vietnam). **Australia:** 8 Dao Tan, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi (✆ **04/831-7755;** www.vietnam.embassy.gov.au). **New Zealand:** 63 Ly Thai To (✆ **04/824-1481**). **U.K.:** 31 Hai Ba Trung St., 4th Floor, Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi (✆ **04/936-0500;** http://ukinvietnam.fco.gov.uk/en).

Emergencies Nationwide emergency numbers are as follows: For police, dial ✆ **113;** for fire, dial ✆ **114;** and for ambulance, dial ✆ **115.** Operators speak only Vietnamese.

Hospitals Vietnamese healthcare is not yet up to Western standards. However, there are competent clinics in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), with international, English-speaking doctors and dentists. If your problem is serious, it is best to get to either one of these cities as quickly as possible. The clinics can arrange emergency evacuation. If the problem is minor, ask your hotel to help you contact a Vietnamese doctor. He or she will probably speak some English, and pharmacies throughout the country are surprisingly well stocked and require no prescriptions (check expiration, though).

International SOS has a 24-hour service center and both Vietnamese and foreign doctors. In Hanoi, go to 31 Hai Ba Trung St. (24-hr. hot line ✆ **04/934-0666**). In Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), go to 65 Nguyen Du St., District 1 (24-hr. hot line ✆ **08/829-8424**). Also in Hanoi, the **French Hospital,** 1 Phuong Mai St.

(✆ **04/577-1100,** or emergency line 04/574-1111), provides fine medical attention at a fraction of the cost of SOS.

Internet Access There are heaps of Internet cafes in cities throughout Vietnam, the best in popular guesthouse and hotel areas. Cafe rates are dirt-cheap—usually around 4,000VND per hour (20¢/15p). In rural areas, it can be as much as 30,000VND ($2/£1.10) per hour, and hotel business centers usually charge at least triple that. Take a short walk in most towns, and you can find affordable service.

Language Vietnamese is the official language of Vietnam. Older residents speak and understand French, while young people are busily learning Chinese these days. Although English is widely spoken among folks in the service industry in Hanoi and Saigon, it is harder to find in other tourist destinations. Off the beaten track, arm yourself with a dictionary and as many Vietnamese words as you can muster. See "Language," p. 268, for more information.

Liquor Laws There are virtually no age-restriction laws limiting when or where you can buy or consume drink. It's not uncommon to find that your motorbike or taxi driver has had a few, so be cautious, especially at night.

Mail A regular airmail letter will take about 10 days to reach North America, 7 days to reach Europe, and 4 days to reach Australia or New Zealand. Mailing things from Vietnam is expensive. A letter up to 10 grams costs 13,000VND (70¢/50p) to North America, 11,000VND (60¢/40p) to Europe, and 9,000VND (50¢/30p) to Australia or New Zealand; postcards, respectively, cost 8,000VND (45¢/30p), 7,000VND (40¢/25p), and 6,000VND (30¢/20p). Express services such as **FedEx** and **DHL** are easily available and are usually located in or around every city's main post office.

Police You won't find a helpful cop on every street corner—just the opposite. Count on them only in cases of dire emergency. Police can even be part of the problem. Especially in the south, you and your car/motorbike driver might, for instance, be stopped for a minor traffic infraction and "fined." If the amount isn't too large, cooperate. Corruption is the rule, and palm greasing and graft pose as police process. Beware.

Safety Vietnam is a generally safe destination, but watch out for crazy traffic, especially in big cities, and for unexploded mines in rural areas. Women should avoid going out alone at night. Beware of pickpockets, especially in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), where drive-by purse snatching is rampant. Don't wear flashy jewelry or leave valuables in your hotel room, especially in smaller lodgings. See "Health & Safety," p. 36, for more tips on keeping yourself safe.

Telephones The international country code for Vietnam is **84.** Most hotels offer international direct dialing, but with exorbitant surcharges of 10% to 25%. It is far cheaper to place a call from a post office. There are plenty of phone booths that accept phone cards (local and international), which can be purchased at any post office or phone-company branch. A local call costs 1,000VND (5¢/5p) per minute. See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 276, for details.

Time Zone Vietnam is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, in the same zone as Bangkok. It is 12 hours ahead of the U.S. Eastern Standard Time during the winter months, and 3 hours behind Sydney.

Tipping Tipping is common in Hanoi and in Saigon. In a top-end hotel, feel free to tip bellhops anywhere from 10,000VND to 15,000VND (55¢–85¢/35p–55p). Most upscale restaurants throughout the country now add a service surcharge of 5% to 10%. If they don't, or if the service is good, you might want to leave another 5%. Taxi drivers will be pleased if you round up the bill (again, mainly in the big cities). Use your discretion for tour guides and others who have been particularly helpful.

Toilets Public toilets *(cau tieu)* are nonexistent in Vietnam outside of tourist attractions, but you'll be welcome in hotels and restaurants. Except for newer hotels and restaurants, squat-style toilets prevail. You'll often see a tub of water with a bowl next to the toilet. Throw two or three scoops of water in the bowl to flush. Finally, bring your own paper and antiseptic hand wipes—just in case.

Water Water is not potable in Vietnam. Outside of top-end hotels and restaurants, drink only beverages without ice, unless the establishment promises that it manufactures its own ice from clean water. Bottled mineral water, particularly the reputable La Vie and A&B brands, is everywhere. Counterfeits are a problem, so make sure you're buying the real thing, with an unbroken seal. A sure sign is typos. "La Vile" water speaks for itself.

4 HANOI ★

Vietnam's capital, Hanoi, ranks among the world's most attractive and interesting cities. Originally named Thang Long, it was first the capital of Vietnam in 1010, and even when the nation's capital moved to Hue under the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802, the city continued to flourish, especially after the French took control in 1888. In 1954, after the French departed, Hanoi was declared Vietnam's capital once again. The city boasts 1,000 years of history, and that of the past few hundred years is marvelously preserved.

Hanoi has a reputation, doubtless accrued from the American war years, as a dour northern political outpost. While the city is certainly smaller, slower, and far less developed than chaotic Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and there are some vestiges of Soviet-influenced concrete monolith architecture, there are also beautiful streets and neighborhoods in Hanoi, and such placid air gives it a gracious, almost regal flavor. The city is dotted with dozens of lakes small and large, around which you can usually find a cafe, a pagoda or two, and absorbing vignettes of street life. Hanoi's 3.5 million residents all seem to be in constant motion, as part of the endless stream of motorbike and bicycle traffic, but there are plenty of quiet corners and tranquil neighborhoods to explore.

Among Hanoi's sightseeing highlights are the **Ho Chi Minh Museum and Mausoleum,** the **Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts,** the grisly **Hoa Lo Prison** (also known as the infamous Hanoi Hilton), and the **Old Quarter,** whose ancient winding streets are named after the individual trades practiced there. Hanoi is also Vietnam's cultural center: The galleries, puppetry, music, and dance performances are worth a stay of at least a few days. You might also want to use the city as a base for excursions to Halong Bay, to Cuc Phuong nature reserve, or north to Sapa.

ACCOMMODATIONS ■
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De Syloia Hotel **27**
Galaxy Hotel **11**
Hanoi Daewoo Hotel **1**
Hilton Hanoi Opera **22**
Hoa Binh Hotel **31**
Hong Ngoc Hotel **14**
InterContinental Hanoi West Lake **7**
Mövenpick Hotel Hanoi **37**
Phuc Loi Hotel **17**
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Cha Ca La Vong **12**
Chim Sao (L'Ouiseau Siffleur) **29**
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nineteen 11 **21**
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Temple of Literature and National University (Van Mieu-Quoc Tu Giam) **42**
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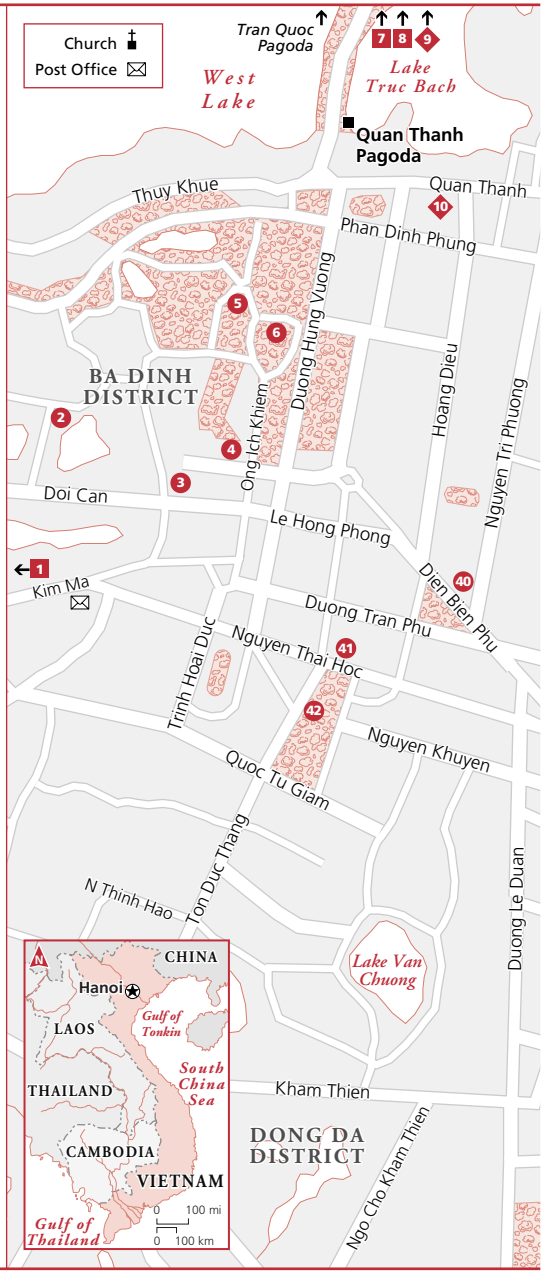

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GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Hanoi, along with Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), is a major international gateway. For details, see Vietnam's "Getting There" section (p. 45). The **Noi Bai International Airport** is located about a 45-minute drive outside Hanoi. If you haven't booked a transfer through your hotel, you can take an airport taxi for $16 (£11), $17 (£11) for a taxi minivan. To save a few dollars, hop on the Vietnam Airlines minivan into town. It costs $2 (£1.30) for a drop-off at the Vietnam Airlines office, but sometimes for an extra buck you can get the driver to take you to your hotel.

BY TRAIN Located on the western edge of Hoan Kiem District, **Hanoi Railway Station** (120 Le Duan; ✆ **04/3942-3697**) is a terminal stop on the Reunification Railroad. For 534,000VND ($30/£20), you'll get a comfortable, air-conditioned soft-berth to Hue, or pay 1,160,000VND ($65/£45) for the same to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Buying tickets at the stations is easy (but takes time); any travel agent can handle it for a small fee.

BY BUS Numerous open-tour options are available in tourist cafes in the Old Quarter on Hang Bac or Hang Be streets. Services and prices are similar: About $27 (£18) earns you an open-tour ticket from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), with all stops in between. See "Visitor Information & Tours," below.

GETTING AROUND

Hanoi is divided into districts. Most sights and accommodations are in **Hoan Kiem District** (downtown), centered around picturesque Hoan Kiem Lake, or in **Ba Dinh District** (west of town) or **Hai Ba Trung District** (south of town). Most addresses include a district name. You'll want to plan your travels accordingly, as getting from district to district can be time-consuming and expensive.

BY BUS Hanoi has only buses in the way of public transport. They are extremely crowded, and using them is difficult if you don't speak Vietnamese.

BY TAXI Taxis can be hailed off the street, at hotels, and at major attractions. The meter should read between 15,000VND (85¢/55p) to start, plus 9,500VND to 11,000VND (about 50¢–60¢/35p–40p) for every kilometer thereafter. The three most reputable companies are **Hanoi Taxi** (✆ **04/3853-5353**), **Hanoi Tourist Taxi** (✆ **04/3856-5656**), and **Mai Linh** (✆ **04/3822-2555**). You (or the concierge) can call ahead for pickup. Make sure the cabbie turns on the meter. Be sure to get your change; drivers often seek a surreptitious tip by claiming they don't have the change. Tell the driver that you'll wait until it's obtained, and it will materialize. ***Warning:*** Stick with accredited taxi companies; some independents rig meters. If you have any problems, take your case to the concierge of your hotel.

BY CAR Renting a car with driver is convenient. Rates start at $33 (£22) per day (or $5/£3.30 per hour, minimum 3 hr.). If an upscale hotel quotes you more, call a tourist cafe (combination eatery and travel agent) or any travel agent.

BY MOTORBIKE Motorcycle taxis are a cheap and easy way to get around the city, but they go like madmen, so this is only for the brave. With haggling, expect to pay about 10,000VND (55¢/35p) for short trips, or $1 (65p) by the hour. Self-rental at the tourist cafes starts at $6 (£4) for the day and is only for the fearless.

BY CYCLO Cyclos are two-seated carts powered by a man on a foot-pedal bike riding behind you. Flag them down anywhere (these guys find you). Being trundled along among whizzing motorcycles isn't always very comfortable, but it's a fun option for touring the Old

Quarter. Pay as low as 10,000VND (55¢/35p) for a short ride, 15,000VND (55¢/55p) for a longer haul, or by the hour for about 50,000VND ($2.80/£1.90). If you're inclined, they'll let you try and ride just for fun.

BY BICYCLE Rental costs about $1 (65p) from a hotel or tourist cafe. The traffic is daunting, but the brave learn quickly how to join the flow.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Most tour companies are based in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon); however, many have branches in Hanoi as well. Operators can usually assist with local tours as well as countrywide services.

- **Ann Tours** (18 Duong Thanh St., Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3923-1366;** fax 08/832-3866; www.anntours.com). This company offers private deluxe tours to Halong Bay and elsewhere. Frommer's readers have written to tell us of their good experiences with this operation.
- **Buffalo Tours** (94 Ma May, Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3828-0702;** www.buffalotours.com). This reputable outfit offers a range of standard tours and some good ecoadventures, like cycling, trekking, and kayaking. Its boat, *Jewel of the Bay,* is a great choice for trips in Halong. Friendly and professional staff.
- **Exotissimo Travel** (26 Tran Nhat Duat St., Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3828-2150;** fax 04/828-2146; www.exotissimo.com). Comprehensive, upscale services.
- **Handspan** (80 Ma May St., Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3926-2828;** fax 04/926-2383; www.handspan.com). A good option for organized trips around Hanoi or adventures to the northern hills and Halong Bay.
- **Topas Outdoor Adventures** (52 To Ngoc Van St.; ✆ **04/3715-1005;** fax 04/715-1007; www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com). This Danish company is very professional and extremely friendly. It's better known for outdoor/trekking tours (to Sapa and other parts of Vietnam) but also offers the standard selection of city tours and 1-day excursions.

Budget Tours

Another good option for tours and transport or for 1- or 2-day excursions is to book with one of the tourist cafes, which are small eateries, Internet cafes, and travel agents all rolled into one. For a good, affordable seat-in-tour coach, try:

- **Sinh Café** (52 Luong Ngoc Quyen, Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3926-1568;** fax 04/926-1621; www.sinhcafevn.com).
- **A–Z Queen Café** (65 Hang Bac, Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3826-0860;** fax 04/826-0300; www.azqueentravel.com).
- **Kim Tours** (137 Hang Bac, Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3926-0804;** www.kimtours.net).
- **An Phu Tours** (50 Yen Phu, Tay Ho District; ✆ **04/3927-3585**).

Fast Facts Hanoi

American Express The local Amex representative, **Exotissimo Travel,** 26 Tran Nhat Duat St. (✆ **04/3828-2150**), does not provide complete travel services, but can direct you if you lose your card. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm.

Currency Exchange Major banks in Hanoi include **Australia New Zealand Bank (ANZ),** 14 Le Thai To St. (✆ **04/3825-8190**); **Citibank,** 17 Ngo Quy en St. (✆ **04/3825-1950**); and **Vietcombank,** 198 Tran Quan K hai (✆ **04/3826-8045**). ATMs are located at ANZ Bank, at Citibank, and in various locations thr oughout the city. Money-changing offic es abound in plac es such as Hang Bac , in the hear t of the backpacker ar ea of the Old Quar ter—**Hanoi S acombank,** 87 Hang Bac (✆ **04/3261-392**), is t ypical of man y. Black-market money changers will appr oach y ou outside the major banks . Best t o just a void the t emptation, as y ou'll oft en be lef t with a f ew c ounterfeit or out- of-circulation not es in the mix.

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **113;** for fire, dial ✆ **114;** and for ambulance, dial ✆ **115.**

Internet A ccess The Tourist I nformation C enter at the nor th end of Hoan K iem Lake (p. 301) off ers fr ee I nternet use . Small I nternet st orefronts ar e numer ous in the Old Quar ter on Hang Bac or Hang Be; all t ourist caf es ha ve I nternet ac cess as w ell. **A–Z Queen C afé,** 65 Hang Bac (✆ **04/3826-0860**), is a good bet with affordable ser vice and a pa y-as-you-use honor sy stem.

Mail The general post offic e is at 75 Dinh Tien Hoang St., Hoan K iem Distric t (✆ **04/3825-7036**). It's open daily fr om 6:30am t o 10pm. You can also send fax es or telexes and make international phone calls. **FedEx** (✆ **04/3824-9054**) is located at 14 L e Thach St., Hoan K iem Distric t.

Telephones The city code for Hanoi is **4.** Most hotels provide international direct dialing, although none allo w y ou t o ac cess an int ernational operat or or A T&T (whose Vietnam access code is 12010288). To do that, y ou will ha ve t o go t o the general post offic e (see abo ve). There ar e public phone booths thr oughout the city for local calls; these ac cept phone car ds pur chased fr om the post offic e.

WHERE TO STAY

Hanoi has everything from historical charm to slick efficiency to budget hole in the wall. Amenities and cleanliness levels are high and prices low, making Hanoi a good place for an upgrade. Most hotels more than $15 (£10) per night will have a phone, air-conditioning, in-room safe, and hair dryer. Children 11 and under usually stay fr ee. Prices shown here are rack rates, and discounts abound—just ask. Note that hotels charge a VAT of up to 20%.

Very Expensive

In addition to the top-rated hotels listed belo w, options on the pricier end include the mammoth **Melia H anoi** (✆ **04/3934-3343;** www.meliahanoi.com), the plush **Hotel Nikko** (✆ **04/3822-3535;** www.hotelnikkohanoi.com), and the **Horizon H otel** (✆ **04/3733-0808**).

Hanoi Daewoo Hotel ★ The Daewoo has a popular guest list (heads of state and dignitaries including Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin have stayed here) but an unfortunate location. It's far away fr om the action of the O ld Quarter and lacks any sor t of social scene. Everything is done large—the lobby, the bars, the rooms with king-size beds, and the 80m (262-ft.) cur ving pool. All interior space is tessellated in marble, deep-toned

wood, or sumptuous fabrics. It's almost a bit *too* much. Bathrooms are surprisingly small in the lower-end rooms, but are still quite well appointed.

360 Kim Ma St., Ba Dinh District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3831-5000.** Fax 04/3831-5010. www.hanoi-daewoohotel.com. 411 units . $240–$330 (£160–£220) double; from $450 (£300) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; 80m (262-ft.) pool; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; children's program; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping arcade; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Hilton Hanoi Opera ★★ The Hilton is a reproduction colonial that makes an elegant arc around the perimeter of the splendid Hanoi Opera building. The inside matches the fine facade, with a lobby done on a grand scale. Rooms are outfitted with richly colored carpet, unique cushioned wallpaper, subdued lighting, and faux Chinese lacquer cabinets. Those on the fifth floor have balconies. Suites are much larger and nicely appointed. Daily newspaper delivery, voice mail, and in-room broadband Internet access keep business travelers up to speed. Leisure travelers can enjoy the inviting courtyard pool, get tips from the helpful concierge, and take advantage of in-house tour services with Exotissimo (open 8am–8pm, daily).

1 Le Thanh Tong St., Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi. ✆ **800/774-1500** in the U.S., or 04/3933-0500. Fax 04/3933-0530. www.hilton.com. 269 units. $380 (£253) double; $425 (£283) executive room; $530 (£350) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; cafe; outdoor pool; fitness center; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms; rooms for those w/limited mobility. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, Wi-Fi, hair dryer, safe.

InterContinental Hanoi West Lake ★★ InterContinental offers a sweet resort-like atmosphere in busy little Hanoi. The hotel is Hanoi's newest five-star and tapped by Condé Nast for its 2008 Hot List. For a romantic treat, splurge on a suite on one of the island pavilions connected to the main building via Venetian-style bridges. All rooms come with private balconies and most have fabulous views of West Lake. Rooms on the top floor ("Atelier rooms") have high, sloping ceilings, giving the space a cozy cabin feel. Located about a 20-minute cab ride away from Hanoi's Old Quarter, this hotel is a perfect getaway from the hustle and bustle of city life. The outdoor Sunset Bar is quickly becoming a weekend destination for local expats.

1A Nghi Tam, Tay Ho District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3270-8888.** Fax 04/3270-9999. www.intercontinental.com. 359 units. $200–$310 double (£133–£207); from $410 (£270) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; outdoor bar; cafe; lounge; outdoor pool; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Mövenpick Hotel Hanoi ★★ At time of writing this hotel, formerly the Guoman Hotel known for a high standard of service and comfort, was closed for renovation. It should be open by the time you read this. Given what Swiss hotelier Mövenpick did with the former Omni Hotel in Saigon (p. 368), expect revamped rooms and luxury upgrades.

83A Ly Thuong Kiet St., Hoan Kem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3822-2800.** Fax 04/3822-2822. www.moevenpick-hotels.com. 154 units. $270 (£180) superior deluxe; $290 (£193) premium deluxe; $380 (£253) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; gym; dry sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; room service; massage; babysitting; nonsmoking floors. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Sheraton Hanoi ★ Just a 10-minute ride north of town, this smart, upscale hotel sits on a peninsula jutting into Hanoi's picturesque West Lake in a neighborhood popular with

the local expat community (which means good restaurants and services in the area). The hotel makes up for any inconvenience to town by being completely self-contained, with fine dining options, a top fitness center, and services that cover all bases, from local touring to business support. Rooms are done in an ultratidy, contemporary style typical of Sheraton hotels—certainly nothing spectacular, but cozy and familiar nonetheless. All units have fine views of the lake. Bathrooms are large, with big tubs, separate showers, and wood and granite detail. In-house dining is tops; a shuttle bus to town runs three times daily and taxis are available 24 hours. The hotel is a popular meeting destination and has room for many.

K5 Nghi Tam, 11 Xuan Dieu Rd., Tay Ho District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3719-9000.** Fax 04/3719-9001. www.sheraton.com. 299 units. $250 (£167) double; from $450 (£300) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; tennis court; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; concierge; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Sofitel Metropole Hanoi ★★★ Hanoi's top choice. Built in 1901, the Metropole is a historic treasure. It's where invading, liberating, or civil armies have found billet and raised their flags, where the first film was shown in Indochina, where Charlie Chaplin spent his honeymoon, where Jane Fonda and Joan Baez took cover in a bomb shelter, and where heads of state and embassy officials resided for many years. In fact, the history of the Metropole is the history of the last 100 years in Hanoi.

The hotel has been through numerous renovations, and a new building was added in 1994. Rooms in the new wing are more spacious, but go for the old wing and walk into a bit of history: Your medium-size room will have wood floors, cane furniture, classic fixtures, and high ceilings. The large, modern bathrooms come with touches such as wood-frame mirrors, fresh flowers, and a fine line of in-house products. The staff couldn't be nicer or more efficient. The pool is small, but the adjoining Bamboo Lounge is an oasis of calm in the city center. Le Beaulieu is popular for classic French fare, while the Spices Garden is a great place to sample local delights (the lunch buffet is a safe and tasty place to try Hanoi street fare including *pho* and *bun cha*). The Metropole even offers cooking classes. The downtown location can't be beat, and there's a nice mix of tourists and businesspeople here.

15 Ngo Quyen St., Hoan Kem District, Hanoi. ✆ **800/221-4542** in the U.S., or 04/3826-6919. Fax 04/3826-6920. www.sofitel.com. 364 units. $370–$600 (£247–£400) double; from $630 (£420) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; nice courtyard pool; top-notch health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

De Syloia Hotel ★ The De Syloia is a cozy little treasure just south of the city center. Rooms are large and clean—not especially luxurious, but comfortable with tidy carpet, dark-wood appointments, and large bathrooms with tubs (deluxe rooms have Jacuzzis). The lobby is compact and clean but not particularly atmospheric, and the whole setup is a Hanoi mini hotel gone upscale, with a good standard throughout. The staff is friendly on a good day, and the amenities are limited, but this is a popular choice away from the downtown traffic.

17a Tran Hung Dao St., Hoan Kem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3824-5346.** Fax 04/3824-1083. www.desyloia.com. 33 units. $150–$170 (£100–£113) double; $190–$220 (£127–£147) suite. Internet rates available. AE,

MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; exercise room; tour desk; car rental; business center; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, free Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Army Hotel ★★ (Value) For comfort and value close to downtown (plus a nice pool), the Army Hotel is a find. In a sprawling complex owned by the Vietnamese military—thus the name—there's no need to salute here, and the friendly staff won't ask you to drop for 20 push-ups. Located on a quiet street just a short walk east of downtown (behind the opera house), the Army is popular with long-term visitors, especially couples who come to adopt in Vietnam. Rooms vary, so ask to see one before you check in; most are large and clean, with tile floors and nice-size bathrooms with combination tub/showers. Each room has a balcony, some with direct pool access. The staff is friendly, the lobby business center is convenient, and the pool is inviting and unique in this price range. Ask about the eclectic suites, some with Japanese-style rooms and a private balcony.

33 C Pham Ngu Lao St. (just behind the opera house), Hoan Kem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3825-2896.** Fax 04/3825-9276. armyhotel@fpt.vn. 96 units. $55 (£37) double; $80 (£53) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool in large central courtyard; exercise room; sauna; small business center w/Internet access ($3/£2 per hour); room service (6am–10pm); babysitting. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hot water for coffee, hair dryer.

Galaxy Hotel ★ Popular with tour groups, the Galaxy is on a busy corner just north of the Old Quarter—a comfortable spot to begin exploring this colorful part of the city. Converted from a 1929 factory, the recently renovated building is colorless but comfortable. Good-size rooms are spotless, with familiar amenities and nondescript decor. The tile bathrooms are small but neat. Corner suites are a great option, with windows facing two directions over the Old Quarter. On the premises are a good Asian restaurant and a nice little lobby bar. Staff members will remember your name and are helpful with advice and suggestions.

1 Phan Dinh Phung St., Ba Dinh District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3828-2888.** Fax 04/3828-2466. galaxyhtl@vnn.vn. 60 units. $109 (£73) double; $149 (£99) suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; tour desk; car rental; room service; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Hoa Binh Hotel ★ Built in 1926, the Hoa Binh is an atmospheric choice. Comfort and history meet at a good level, and whether you're walking up the creaky grand staircase or opening French doors onto a balcony overlooking the busy street, you know that you're in Hanoi here. Sizable rooms have original light fixtures, molded ceilings, and glossy wood furniture. Everything is done a bit low-luxe, however: The shiny polyester bedspreads, velveteen drapes, and spongy mattresses detract from the overall effect. Bathrooms are plain and small but spotless. The hotel is in a prime downtown location, and the bar has a view of the city. Ask to see a room before checking in, as they vary in size, shape, and degree of smoke or mustiness; in general, though, this is a good bet. It's popular with tour groups.

27 Ly Thuong Kiet St., Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/825-3315** or 04/3825-3692. Fax 04/3826-9818. www.hoabinhhotel.com. 103 units. $86–$96 (£57–£64) double; $123–$149 (£82–£99) suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; small business center; shopping; limited room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, high-speed Internet, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Zephyr Hotel ★★ This downtown boutique property is a real find. Nine floors overlook the southern end of central Hoan Kiem Lake. It's perfect for luxury travelers who want to be in the middle of things but can't bear the thought of an Old Quarter

minihotel (though many of these hotels are being upgraded, they can still be pretty beat-up and rooms very noisy from the busy streets below). Thin office-style carpets in rooms are a drawback, but beds have big fluffy duvets, and the built-in wooden cabinetry is sleek and contemporary. Deluxe rooms are quite luxurious, and two of them have balconies. Upper floors are best—some have great views. The first-floor restaurant serves international fare and a very good buffet breakfast. The place is like a large international hotel stuffed into the space of a Hanoi minihotel. The staff is very efficient, and you couldn't ask for a better downtown location.

4–6 Ba Trieu St., Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3934-1256.** Fax 04/3934-1262. www.zephyrhotel.com.vn. 38 units. $98–$108 (£65–£72) standard/superior double; $118 (£79) deluxe; $158 (£105) Zephyr suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar (top-floor lounge); exercise room; tour desk; business center; massage. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar, fridge, safe.

Inexpensive

Hong Ngoc Hotel ★★ With five locations all in the heart of the Old Quarter, this is a good no-frills option close to Hoan Kiem Lake. The incredibly friendly staff has a can-do attitude and will help you with any detail, such as renting a car, motorcycle, or bicycle. Rooms are compact, but all have dark-wood trim and the quality amenities of a proper hotel. Larger suites are a good choice. Bathrooms are small and clean. This is top-notch downtown affordability, a mini hotel with attitude—like a terrier who thinks himself a Great Dane.

14 Luong Van Can St., Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3826-7566.** Fax 04/38245362. 40 units. 30–34 Hang Manh St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3828-5053.** Fax 04/3828-5054. 53 units. 99 Ma May St. Hoan Kiem. ✆ **04/3828-3631.** 18 units. 39 Hang Bac St., Hoan Kiem. ✆ **04/3926-0322.** Fax 04/3926-1600. 25 units. 95–7 Nguyen Trong To St. ✆ **04/3716-4143.** Fax 04/3716-4187. 28 units. www.hongngochotel.com. $47–$59 (£31–£39). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; limited room service; Internet (free in lobby). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe.

Phuc Loi Hotel ★ This is the standard Old Quarter mini hotel, but everything at the Phuc Loi is super tidy and ornate. Rooms are small but spotless, with faux-wood floors and high ceilings. This place is relatively new and everything is in good shape. The bathrooms are a nice size, with a tub/shower combo and granite counters. Splurge $55 (£37) for one of the three split-level VIP rooms. Rooms on higher floors have great views of the Old Quarter. The staff is friendly and helpful.

128 Hang Bong St., Old Quarter, Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi. ✆ **04/3928-5235.** Fax 04/3828-9897. www.phucloihotel.com. 25 units. $40–$55 (£27–£37) double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small gym; bike rental; tour desk. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

It's hard to have a bad meal in Hanoi. The French influence is everywhere, with both classical French and Vietnamese fusion fare, all priced for any budget. Almost every ethnic food variation is well represented in the city as well.

Hanoi has savory specialties that must be sampled. For that, hit the streets and dine in small local eateries. *Pho,* by far the most popular local dish, is noodles with slices of beef *(bo)* or chicken *(ga),* fresh bean sprouts, and condiments. *Bun cha,* a snack of rice noodles and spring rolls, has made the **Dac Kim** restaurant (at 1 Hang Manh, in the Old Quarter) city-renowned. And don't miss **Cha Ca,** Hanoi's famed spicy fish fry-up (p. 290).

Expensive

Club de L'Oriental ★★★ VIETNAMESE This is upscale Vietnamese food at its best—beautiful colonial decor, properly trained staff, and amazing food. The fresh spring

rolls are the best in to wn. For mains I highly r ecommend the grilled chicken in lemon leaves served with a dipping plate of salt and pepper in a sprinkle of lime juice, a light but savory dish. On the richer side, try the sautéed prawns in tamarind sauce. The main floor has a handful of tables set up ar ound an open kitchen, seats ar ound which ar e perfect for couples or single diners. For an intimate, but chilly experience, reserve a table in the wine cellar. My one criticism is the stingy wine pour (the manager said six glasses per bottle, but it felt like they w ere aiming for sev en or eight). O therwise this place is superb.

Note: Club de L'Oriental is r un by the same folks as **Emperor** (18B Le Thanh Tong St., Hoan Kiem D istrict), a Vietnamese restaurant that was giv en three stars in the last edition of this guide. E mperor has been under r enovation for the past 2 y ears and is set to open mid-2009. Ask staff at Club de L'Oriental for the latest updates.

22 Tong Dan, Hoan K iem Distric t. ✆ **04/3826-8801.** Fax 04/3826-8802. Reser vations r ecommended. Main courses $8.25–$52 (£5.50–£35). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm.

Green Tangerine ★★ FRENCH The Green Tangerine is set in a lo vingly restored 1928 colonial right in the center of the Old Quarter. Its small courtyard, just a few steps off busy Hang Be, is great for an afternoon drink, while the air-conditioned dining r oom is a real sanctuary for a luxurious meal. It's very popular with expats, and that makes for a constantly ev olving menu to keep up with r epeat customers. D ishes might include a lovely bass enhanced with ginger ser ved with slices of zucchini and potatoes piled like a layer cake. The creamy Cointreau-flavored frozen yogurt served in a green tangerine shell is delicious and r efreshing. The set menus ar e popular and good v alue. Everything here is rich and delicious.

48 Hang Be, Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3825-1286.** Main courses $7.90–$20 (£5.25–£13). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10:30pm.

La Verticale ★★ FUSION Every time I come her e it's buzzing with F rench-speaking patrons happily tucking into their meal and sipping their wine. Chef D idier Corlou (formerly of Le B eaulieu in the S ofitel Metropole) has done well. His food is at once an homage to the lightness of local cuisine and the rich gastr onomic traditions of his native France. The presentation of dishes is decidedly flamboyant, but adds to the special dining experience. This place is excellent value given the quality of food, but if you're looking to save on the bill (or y our waistline) skip the appetiz ers; main por tions are generous and come with a *mis en bouche* anyway.

19 Ngo Van So St. ✆ **04/3944-6317.** Main courses $16–$33 (£11–£22). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–2pm and 6:30–10pm.

nineteen 11 VIETNAMESE/EUROPEAN Named for the y ear the H anoi O pera House was built, nineteen 11 boasts a gr eat location in a beautiful historic building. Unfortunately, the inside is decked out in garish decor, elevator music plays in the background, and the staff is o verly attentive. The redeeming feature is the fabulous outdoor seating ar ea, a gr eat place to grab wine and an appetiz er (try the rich and sav ory pan-seared foie gras ser ved with apple chutney) befor e a night at the opera.

1 Trang Tien St. (southern side of the Opera House), Hoan K iem District. ✆ **04/3933-4801.** www.nineteen11.com.vn. Main courses 140,000VND–495,000VND ($7.90–$28/£5.25–£19). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–10pm.

Press Club ★★ CONTINENT AL Subdued and elegant, this place says " power lunch"—and offers cuisine and prices to match. The indoor r estaurant is sizable y et

The Best Authentic Local Fare

Hanoi's local cuisine is some of the best in Vietnam, and the finest local dishes are served at small one-dish restaurants, usually just open-air joints at street-side, where you might wonder why there's a line out the door. To Vietnamese, it's about the food, not the atmosphere. Standards of hygiene might appear poor, but do as locals do and wipe down bowls and chopsticks with a napkin before digging in. Eating on the street means you might have some tummy trouble, but if you stick to the few places recommended below, you should be okay.

The ubiquitous *pho*—noodle soup served with slices of beef *(bo)* or chicken *(ga),* fresh bean sprouts, and condiments—can be found anywhere. And don't miss *cha ca,* Hanoi's famed spicy fish fry (see Cha Ca La Vong below).

Bun Bo Nam Bo ★★, 67 Hang Dieu St. (✆ **04/3923-0701**), only serves one main course: *bun bo,* a dish of fresh rice noodles with herbs and spices, topped with beef and crispy fried garlic that only costs 28,000VND ($1.60/£1.05). Sound simple? It is. It's the subtlety of the flavors of this dish and the stock that brings 'em here in droves. Just order by holding up as many fingers as you want bowls of *bun bo*, take a seat at the low tables in the brightly lit interior, and wait. A spartan atmosphere, but a rich and delicious dish worth hunting down. No credit cards. Daily 7am to 10:30pm.

Cha Ca La Vong ★★, 14 Cha Ca St. (✆ **04/3825-3929**), is on a street called Cha Ca, and it serves one dish—you guessed it— *cha ca. Cha ca* is a delicate white fish, fried at high heat in peanut oil with dill, turmeric, rice noodles, and peanuts—and it's delicious. The place is pretty grungy, and to call the service "indifferent" would be to sing its praises, but that's the beauty here: It's all about the food. You order by saying how many you are (expect to pay 70,000VND/$3.95/£2.60 per person) and how many bottles of beer or soda you'd like. Then it's do-it-yourself, with some gruff guidance, as you stir in the ingredients on a frying pan over a charcoal hibachi right at the table. It's a rich dish and great with some hot sauce (go easy on it at first). Just say "Cha Ca," and any cabdriver can take you there. Avoid copycats: The original Cha Ca La Vong is the only game in town. No credit cards. Daily 10am to 2pm and 4 to 10pm.

Gia Thuyen Pho (Noodle Soup) ★★, 49 Bat Dan St. (on the west side of the Old Quarter near the old citadel wall), is a very popular storefront *pho* stand in Hanoi's Old Quarter. If you've seen the Japanese film *Tampopo* about the making of the perfect noodle soup, or saw the *Seinfeld* episode about New York City's "Soup Nazi" who, because of his quality broth, chose his customers instead of vice versa, you'll have an idea what it's like. The line is around the block day and night. The formula is simple: delicious cured beef, fresh noodles,

private, done in dark tones of maroon and forest green with solid wood furniture and detailing. There is outdoor seating on the terrace, facing a stage that features regular live acts. The menu is full of sumptuous Continental standards: antipasto starters, goat-cheese

and spices. Just order "One please" (it is *pho* with beef or nothing) and pay the surly lady, who might even let a few customers go ahead of you if she doesn't like the cut of your jib. Unlike in most *pho* joints, no one serves you, so you have to carry your own bowl to an open slot at a crowded table (if you come with a friend, you might have to separate), and the place is as shabby as any little noodle stand, but when you pull those first noodles off the chopsticks and follow with a spoonful of broth, you'll know why you came. No phone. One bowl of beef *pho* is 25,000VND ($1.40/95p). Daily 6am to 11pm.

Nguyen Sinh Restaurant Francais, 17–19 Ly Quoc St., directly north on the street that runs in front of the Nha Tho Cathedral (✆ **04/3826-5234**). What is so Vietnamese about this French restaurant? Everything. Founded in 1950, these folks were the ones (among many) who kept alive the art of baking bread and cooking French foods. Vietnamese French has its own bend, say French expats, and in Hanoi it's a cuisine of its own. This little storefront offers good imported cheese and wine; it's sort of like Hanoi's de facto New York deli (it'll do in a pinch, anyway, for that late-night snack). Here you can get a delicious baguette with cheese and pâté for just 10,000VND (55¢/35p), or a savory fried steak French-style. You'll find locals in bets trying out their newest licks on the saxophone, and French expats getting a little taste of home, chatting with the Francophone clientele. Daily 7am to 10pm.

Restaurant Lau Tu Xuyen, 163 Yen Phu, with another location at 199 Duong Nghi Tam (✆ **04/3714-0289**), is a fun adventure. Way out on the eastern shore of West Lake (about 30,000VND/$1.70/£1.10 by taxi from the city center), this big warehouse of a restaurant is the best place in town to enjoy the real *lau,* or Vietnamese hot pot. Go with a Vietnamese friend or be open to some creative charades with your waitress; there's no English menu and foreign visitors are rare. The official directions for cooking hot pot? As my friend says, "You just put." Add what ever you like —fresh seafood, beef, poultry, and vegetables—to a shared pot of boiling broth on a hot plate in the center of the table. They also can bring out a barbecue setup for small kabobs. You order like you would order dim sum, choosing plates of raw ingredients off a tray. The place is packed in the evenings, especially in the winter (this is Vietnam's version of stew) and on weekends. The entry is just adjacent to the Thang Loi Lakeside hotel. The local draft beer flows freely and costs little. Make a night of it and end with a walk in this busy expat neighborhood. Expect to pay about $5 (£3.30) per person in a group. No credit cards. Daily 11am to 10pm.

salad, tuna steak, smoked trout and baked grouper, and various wood-grilled imported steaks and meat dishes. Unique is the "deconstructed" Vietnamese *pho* noodle soup with lobster, foie gras, and truffle. For dessert, try the white-chocolate sticky rice or rich rice pudding. The service here is impeccable.

The **Deli,** on the ground floor, is a good, cozy place to grab a local or international paper (and browse the book corner), accompanied by a relaxed lunch of sandwiches or gourmet pizzas, not to mention the Aussie pie with chips or "Mom's Meatloaf." Breakfast is served all day. A good choice for a casual dose of home. The second and third floors house event facilities and meeting rooms.

59A Ly Thai To St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3934-0888.** www.hanoi-pressclub.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $13–$60 (£8–£40). AE, MC, V. Restaurant: ground floor daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm; terrace Mon–Fri 9am–11pm, Sat–Sun 3–11pm. Deli: daily 6:30am–10pm.

Vine ★ FUSION All good things must come to an end. For more than 3 years, Vine reigned supreme as *the* place to find a fabulous meal in Hanoi any day of the week. But ownership squabbles and staff departures spell bad times for this West Lake restaurant. For now, signature dishes such as the tuna tartar and lobster bisque remain unrivaled in the city. Mains are starting to slip though; on a recent visit, the famed pizza lacked the crispy, savory zip of previous times, and the vegetarian lasagna was full of bitter mushrooms, stingy on spinach, and buried in far too much cheese. Memorable evenings can still be had, especially if you reserve a table in the wine cellar or grab one of the corner getaways on the second floor.

1A Xuan Dieu St., Ho Tay District. ✆ **04/3719-8000.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $6–$60 (£4–£40). AE, MC, V. Daily 9am to last order.

Wild Rice (Lá Lúá) ★ ASIAN FUSION Nothing about Lá Lúá portends to be authentic Vietnamese, and everything from the decor to the dining is in fact an amalgam of traditions and customs. The place looks like an upmarket L.A. bistro borrowing Japanese themes, with tall stands of bamboo encased in glass, slate floors, and white walls that shine with the mellow glow of indirect lighting. The food is good, Vietnamese-influenced fare. Try the barbecued squid or beef with coconut or the deliciously spicy and savory grilled chicken in chile with lemon grass. Presentation is Zen simple: white linen with black chopsticks, a plate, a bowl, and a candle. It's all a bit studied, really, but the food is very good.

6 Ngo Thi Nham St., Hai Ba Trung District. ✆ **04/3943-8896.** Fax 04/3943-6299. Main courses 60,000VND–160,000VND ($3.40–$9/£2.25–£6). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm and 6–11pm.

Moderate

Al Fresco's (Kids) TEX-MEX Run by Australian expats, Al Fresco's is two floors of friendly, casual dining. With checkered tablecloths, oldies music, and a great view from the second floor to the street below, this is the place to bring the kids (or yourself) when they're in need of a slice of home. The place serves good Tex-Mex fare, excellent imported and local Aussie steaks, and pizza, chicken wings, and the like. Ribs are the house specialty. The burgers are the real deal, with all the fixins. Desserts are good old standbys such as brownies a la mode. The wine list is heavy on Australian and inexpensive South American reds.

23L Hai Ba Trung St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3826-7782.** Main courses 92,000VND–220,000VND ($5.20–$14/£3.45–£8.30). MC, V. Daily 8:30am–11pm.

Indochine ★ VIETNAMESE Set in a beautifully restored colonial, this place is a longtime tourist favorite. The food, like that at many restaurants in Hanoi, is Vietnamese cuisine toned down for foreign palates, but Indochine does it well. The spring rolls are great, as are both the banana-flower salad and the crispy fried prawn-cakes with ginger. Ask about daily specials. With indoor and patio seating and traditional Vietnamese

performances in the evening (call ahead for times), Indochine is well worth a visit for the beautiful colonial setting alone. Take a cab; it's hard to find. ***Warning:*** The restaurant fills with tour groups at lunchtime, which brings a rise in noise level and a drop in service quality.

16 Nam Ngu St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3942-4097.** Main courses $2–$6.50 (£1.30–£4.30). MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 5:30–10pm.

Khazanna ★★ INDIAN The current incarnation of this restaurant serves a fine menu of northern and southern Indian dishes, complemented by the tidy Indian-themed decor and the excellent service and presentation: The curries are served in small metal crocks with brass ladles. The affordable lunch menu brings in crowds of businesspeople. In the evening, choose from an extensive selection of curries, grilled dishes, and naan (bread). Everything's good here.

1C Tong Dan St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3934-5657.** Main courses 48,000VND–100,000VND ($2.70–$5.65/£1.80–£3.75). MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm.

Restaurant Bobby Chinn ★★ CALIFORNIA/VIETNAMESE/FRENCH With a decor and panache that would hold its own on a side street of SoHo or a lofty perch in the Bay Area, Restaurant Bobby Chinn makes for an interesting evening. It's on the southwest corner of Hoan Kiem Lake, where longtime expat and raconteur Mr. Chinn holds court and runs the show from behind the large, open bar at the entrance. It's the place to see and be seen these days in Hanoi, and it's a popular late-night spot where local jazz artists like to drop by. A revolving collection of local artists' works adorns the walls, and good music is always playing (a sign on the door reads: kenny g–free zone). Out front, guests dine at simple tables and in a few booths with picture-window views of the lake and the street. In the back, diners lounge on overstuffed couches at low tables in a maze of discreet nooks—it's all quite cinematic. However you feel about the atmosphere, Mr. Chinn serves a delightfully eclectic menu of fine French and Vietnamese-inspired dishes, all with a playful, cross-cultural flair. To start, try the rib sampler or "symphony of flavors" from the tapas menu. Main courses such as pan-roasted salmon with wasabi mashed potatoes, or perhaps green tea–smoked duck, have a certain Franco-Japanese appeal.

1 Ba Trieu St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3934-8577.** www.bobbychinn.com. Reservations recommended. AE, MC, V. Main courses $12–$22 (£8–£15); tapas menu from $4 (£2.65). Daily 11:30am–midnight.

Seasons of Hanoi ★ VIETNAMESE The atmosphere is picture-perfect at Seasons: intimate, candlelit, earth-toned surroundings in a casual yet beautifully restored colonial with authentic native furniture. The spring rolls are heaven, as are the tempura soft-shell crabs. The kitchen serves great fish the way you like it—fried, boiled, on kabobs, or in hot pots. Try the sautéed eel with chile and lemon grass or the fried chicken in panda leaves. Presentation is elegant and the wine list long. ***Tip:*** Sit on the first floor to avoid the group tours that take over the second floor.

95B Quan Thanh St., Ba Dinh District. ✆ **04/3843-5444.** Reservations recommended, especially for groups. Main courses 40,000VND–80,000VND ($2.25–$4.50/£1.50–£3). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–10pm.

Inexpensive

Chim Sao (L'Oiseau Siffleur) ★ Finds VIETNAMESE This charming restaurant serves authentic Vietnamese dishes in a home-style ambience. Rotating art hangs on unfinished walls, and guests have to remove footwear before heading upstairs to sit on floor pillows and dine over squat tables. The English translations of dishes rarely do them

justice—the "tofu with egg salted " is actually a delightful dish of cubed, batter ed tofu that is lightly fried for a crisp exterior . Other must-try dishes are the caramelized pork served in a piping hot clay pot and the " mountainous flower rice"—sticky rice served with a sprinkle of crispy fried garlic.

65 Ngo Hue , Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3976-0633.** Main courses 60,000VND–90,000VND ($3.40–$5.10/£2.25–£3.40). No credit cards. Daily 11am–2pm and 5:30–10pm.

Le Café des Arts de Hanoi ★ BISTRO/CONTINENTAL After strolling around Hoan Kiem Lake, stop off its northwest end for a drink or a bite at this friendly bistro-style eatery, run by French expats and open all day. Spacious, with tiled floors and shuttered windows looking into the narrow Old Quarter street below, the cafe has casual rattan furniture and a long, inviting bar. It doubles as an art gallery, which explains the interesting paintings hanging throughout. The Vietnamese art crowd also adds some attractive local color. Most inviting, however, is the excellent food. Ask for the special of the day, and stick to bistro standbys such as the omelets or a *croque madame*—toasted bread and cheese sautéed in egg—and house specialty *salade bressare* (very fresh chicken and vegetables in a light mayonnaise sauce). You'll also find good house wine by the glass and excellent lunch specials.

11B Ngo Bao Khanh, Old Quarter, Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3828-7207.** Main courses $6–$12 (£4–£8). MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm. Bar open until midnight.

Mediterraneo ★ ITALIAN You'll find a tasty but typical range of northern Italian fare at this mellow, street-side cafe on Nha Tho, Hanoi's stylish cafe area (called Church St.). Prosciutto with melon, tomato, and homemade mozzarella is a good starter. Follow with good homemade pasta, a choice of grilled dishes, or pizza. It's affordable, cozy, and casual. There are daily specials and a good wine list, too.

23 Nha Tho St. (near the Old Church), Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3826-6288.** Main courses $6–$15 (£4–£10). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–11pm.

Quan An Ngon ★★ VIETNAMESE *Ngon* means delicious in Vietnamese, and this lively restaurant with its extensive menu lives up to its name. Sit at the elbow-to-elbow tables in the open air or else inside, where it's cooler and quieter. The bustling courtyard, filled with Vietnamese professionals and students, is surrounded by well-stocked, clean food stalls, reminiscent of what you might find, at random, on the street, but without some of the, uh, hygiene concerns. Try the pancakes; try the noodles; try as much as you can. Everything on the menu is good, the staff is on the ball, and the prices are reasonable, so visitors can get a wide-ranging sample of Vietnamese fare.

Note: Seafood fanatics, head to sister restaurant **Hai San Ngon** (199a Nghi Tam St., Tay Ho District; ✆ **04/3719-3169;** daily 10:30am–10:30pm), which serves good fish and prawn dishes (*Hai San* is Vietnamese for seafood) in an atmospheric outdoor setting.

18 Phan Boi Chau St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3942-8162.** Main courses 26,000VND–115,000VND ($1.50–$6.50/£1–£4.30). MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Tamarind Café ★★ VEGETARIAN Even if you're not a vegetarian, this welcoming cafe's inventive menu will tickle your fancy. Vegetarian wonton soup and two-color soup (spinach and sweet potato) take the chill off Hanoi winter nights and go great with the selection of sandwiches. Other inventive options include "ratatofu" (ratatouille over tofu) and an all-day breakfast served with delicious homemade fruit condiments. Fruit shakes and excellent teas round out the meal. This is a great place to take a break from the

Finds Have You Tried the Snake?

Six kilometers (3 3/4 miles) to the east of Hanoi, across the Red River, lies the town of **Le Mat,** also known as the "snake village." Among shanty houses and winding alleys, you'll find Chinese-style roofs sheltering the elegant dining areas of flashy little restaurants, all strangely tucked away. What's the big secret? The town is the hub of the very taboo snake industry. The Vietnamese taboo is not much different from that in the West (something like "Eat snake? Ooooh, yuck!"). Snake is also considered a male aphrodisiac, a kind of fried Viagra, so at night it's not uncommon to see groups of businessmen drunk as skunks piling into these places for a bit of medicine.

So, here's the drill. Finding it is half the battle (or adventure). Any taxi driver will be happy to take you to his friend's place in anticipation of a commission. Feel free to ask to see another restaurant (some of them are pretty disgusting), but expect to pay about $5 (£3.30) to get here. There are lots of restaurants in Le Mat, but try **O Sin** (✆ **04/3827-2984**).

You'll be greeted by a friendly owner who'll usher you back to the cages and put on quite a show of stirring up the snakes before selecting one he thinks will feed your party. He'll then quote you a ridiculous price, but expect to pay somewhere between $5 and $10 (£3.30–£6.65) per person, after bargaining.

Then the show begins. Before your eyes, the owner kills the snake, drains the blood into a jar of rice whiskey, and systematically disembowels the animal, extracting the liver and showing you the still-beating heart before adding it to the whiskey/blood concoction. The guest of honor eats the heart and takes the first sip of whiskey. Thus begins a lengthy seven-course meal, starting with fried snake skin, grilled snake filet, snake spring rolls, snake soup with rice cake, minced snake dumpling, and copious amounts of rice whiskey. It's a decent meal, really, and certainly something to brag about.

Be warned that many of these places are part of the underground market in endangered species, but the snakes are common cobras found everywhere in Vietnam. Be clear with the driver about where you want to go (in other words, not to a brothel afterward), and don't pay until you arrive at your destination.

hectic Old Quarter. There are street-side tables out front and funky seating in back. A good place to meet other travelers and pick up advice.

80 Ma May St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3926-0580.** Main courses $3.10–$5 (£2.05–£3.30). MC, V. Daily 5:30am–11pm.

Snacks & Cafes

For great coffee and desserts, try **Moca Café,** 14–16 Nha Tho St., Hoan Kiem District (✆ **04/3825-6334**). This area has become the popular spot for a growing little bohemian community in Hanoi, and businesses are sprouting up all along Nha Tho, the street that extends from St. Christopher's Church. **Paris Deli,** 13 Nha Tho St., Hoan Kiem District (✆ **04/3928-6697**), is a popular spot with great breads and deli sandwiches.

One of the main attractions around Hoan Kiem Lake is **Fanny's Ice Cream,** 48 Ly Thai To St., Hoan Kiem District (✆ **04/3828-5689**), on the west side of the lake. Fanny's serves exquisite gelato-style ice cream. You can also find local ice-cream shops along Trang Tien between the lake and the Press Club. For 5,000VND (30¢/20p), enjoy a cone and be part of the local scene.

Pepperonis, 29 Ly Quoc Su St., Hoan Kiem District (✆ **04/3928-5246**), serves the pizza that backpackers have been longing for along the tough travel trails throughout Asia. The pizza is cheap and best on the popular bar street, across from Café des Arts.

Little Hanoi, 21–23 Hang Gai St., Hoan Kiem District (✆ **04/3828-8333**), just north of the lake, is a little local-style fast-food joint, with basic but tidy bamboo and wood decor. It's not on the menu, but insiders know to order the *pho ga* (chicken noodle soup), which is outstanding here. This is a good place for a light meal (and a good central meeting point). Little Hanoi delivers, too.

Highland's Coffee is the local version of Starbucks and a popular place to beat the heat. Find it at lakeside (38–40 Ly Thai To St., Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3828-7043**) or in a hip outdoor courtyard between the Hilton and the Hanoi Opera House (✆ **04/3933-4947**).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Remember that state-owned attractions usually close for lunch from 11:30am to 1:30pm. Be sure not to accept any extraneous pamphlets or unwanted guides at sights; all come with a nominal but frustrating fee.

Ba Dinh District

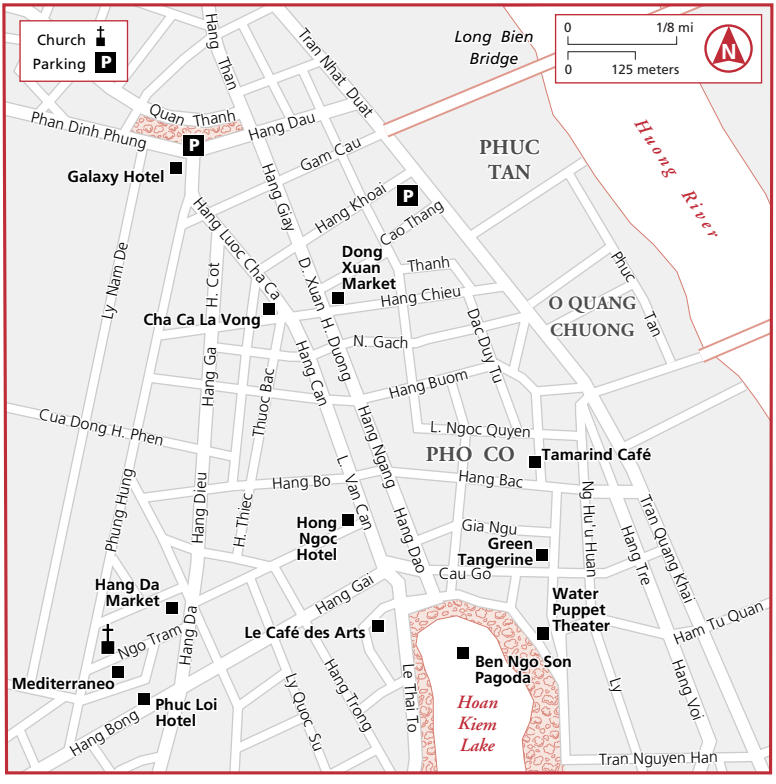
Army Museum ★★ This museum, opened in 1959, presents the Vietnamese side of the country's struggle against colonial powers. There are three buildings of odds and ends from both the French and American wars here, including evocative photos. Most interesting, though, is the actual war equipment on display, including aircraft, tanks, bombs, and big guns, some with signs indicating just how many of which enemy the piece took out. There is a tank belonging to the troops that crashed through the Presidential Palace gates on April 30, 1975, Vietnamese Liberation Day. Outside, you'll see a spectacular display of downed French and U.S. aircraft wreckage. Also on the grounds is Hanoi's ancient flag tower (Cot Co), constructed from 1805 to 1812. The exhibits have English translations, which makes this an easy and worthwhile visit.

28A Dien Bien Phu St., Ba Dinh District. ✆ **04/3823-4264.** Admission 20,000VND ($1.10/75p). Tues–Thurs and Sat–Sun 8–11:30am and 1:30–4:30pm.

Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum ★★ In an imposing, somber, granite-and-concrete structure modeled on Lenin's tomb, Ho lies in state, embalmed and dressed in his favored khaki suit. He asked to be cremated, but his wish was not heeded. A respectful demeanor is required, and the dress code mandates no shorts or sleeveless shirts. ***Note:*** The mausoleum is usually closed in October and November, when Ho goes to Russia for body maintenance of an undisclosed nature. The museum might be closed during this period as well.

On Ba Dinh Sq., Ba Dinh District. Tues–Thurs and Sat 8–11am. Last visitors admitted at 10:15am.

Ho Chi Minh Museum ★★ English-language explanations help to piece together the fragments of Ho's life and cause at this museum tribute; you'll see personal items, photos, and documents detailing the rise of the nation's communist revolution. The



rhetoric is laid on a bit thick, but all in all it 's an interesting and informative display. Completely unique to Vietnam are the conceptual displays symbolizing freedom, reunification, and social progress through flowers, fruit, and mirrors. Have a look.

3 Ngo Ha (left of 1 Pillar Pagoda, near Ba Dinh Sq.), Ba Dinh District. ✆ **04/3846-3757.** Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Tues–Sun 8–11:30am and 1:30–4pm.

Ho Chi Minh's Residence ★★ Ho's residence, the well-known house on stilts, is behind the Presidential Palace, a gorgeous French colonial building built in 1901 for the resident French governor. Shunning the glorious structure nearby, Ho instead chose to live here from 1958 to 1969. Facing an exquisite landscaped lake, the structure does have its charm, and the spartan room is an interesting glimpse into the life of this enigmatic national hero. The basement was a meeting place for the politburo; upstairs are the bedroom and a study. Little details including his phone and walking cane are kept behind glass. Behind the house is a garden of fruit trees, many of them exotics imported from other lands, including miniature rosebushes and areca trees from the Caribbean.

Behind the Presidential Palace at Ba Dinh Sq., Ba Dinh District. Guided tour 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Tues–Sun 8–11am and 1:30–4:30pm.

Flying Dragons & Thieving Turtles: Hanoi's Founding

Originally, at its prehistoric founding as Thang Long, Hanoi was called **"the Ascending Dragon."** The dragon that ascended, so the story goes, created civilization as we know it along the Red River Valley, and then plunged to his sleep in Halong Bay, thereby creating the grand karst slopes—today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The dragon is the symbol of the city, and you'll find references to it wherever you go.

Hanoi's other important creation myth is one oddly echoed by the legendary tale of King Arthur and his rise to the throne after receiving the sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government," says Eric Idle's character in Monty Python's spoof of the Arthur legend, and Hanoi's mandate granted by a giant turtle in Hoan Kiem is equally ridiculous, but a great one for putting the kids to bed to at night.

Le Loi, the first king of a united Viet people, asked the powers in heaven to help him vanquish the Chinese in the 2nd century A.D. His answer came from a giant turtle that rose from the depths of Hoan Kiem Lake and offered him the sword that he would use to drive the Chinese out. (Vietnamese history is full of valiant tales about driving the Chinese out.) When Le Loi returned to the lake to give thanks, the turtle rose again out of the water and took a firm jaw hold of the sword and dragged it to the watery depths, a sign that the citizens could lay down their arms and the city would prosper in peace. The turtle fooled old Le Loi, because the Vietnamese would suffer under Chinese oppression for centuries to come. The myth is best depicted at the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater (p. 303). And keep an eye out for a unique breed of lake turtles—you'll see them basking on the central island. See the section on Hoan Kiem (p. 300) for details on the lake's temples and sights, and note that most addresses in this chapter are given in relation to the lake, so you should get to know it during your stay in the Vietnamese capital.

Hun Tiep Lake and the Downed B-52 This place won't blow you away for its size or beauty; in fact, what brings many here is that it's an ordinary neighborhood, a maze of quiet lanes broken only by a small pond and, in the brackish water, the wreckage of an American B-52 shot down during the Christmas air raids of 1972. Many folks, veterans among them, find that a visit here puts a perspective on the war and that the rusting wreckage brings our abstract historical impressions back to the concrete present; others see landing gear, struts, and metal sheathing in a grungy pond. There's a partly submerged memorial plaque, and the area is cordoned off; entrance fees are soon to follow, no doubt. Most taxi drivers know it, or else some creative charades will get the point across. Drivers will drop you off at the head of the alley (Lane 55) leading to the site (a handwritten sign reads b-52 with an arrow).

Located just south of West Lake along Hoang Hoa Tham Rd., and a short walk down Lane 55 heading south, Ba Dinh District.

One-Pillar Pagoda ★ To the right of the Ho Chi Minh Museum is the unique One-Pillar Pagoda, a 1049 wooden structure that sits on stilts over a lake. A king of the Ly Dynasty, Ly Thai Thong King, had it built after having a dream in which Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the goddess of mercy, presented him with a lotus flower. The existing pagoda is a miniature reproduction of the original, which was said to represent a lotus emerging from the water. It is certainly interesting, and a prayer here is said to bring fertility and good health. It's best to wear something full length (skirt or trousers), not shorts.

Right of Ho Chi Minh Museum, near Ba Dinh Sq., Ba Dinh District. Daily 6–11:30am and 2–6pm.

Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts ★★ This very worthwhile museum features Vietnamese art of the 20th century, up to the 1970s or so. While the presentations are a bit crowded and rustic, there are explanations in English. Much of the art is outstanding, although you won't really see any works of an innovative or controversial nature. Entire rooms are devoted to the Vietnamese style of lacquer and silk painting, wood block, and folk art. Techniques are explained—a nice touch. Interesting also are the modern works of wood statuary interspersed among the exhibits. Some are patriotic in nature, depicting daily life or events during the war or done in Soviet-influenced caricature, with heavy-limbed peasants striking triumphant poses. The top floors are devoted to prehistoric artifacts and Buddhist sculptures, some of which are huge and impressive. Don't miss the famous 11th-century goddess of mercy (Kouan Yin), with her thousand arms and eyes in the far-left room on the second floor. Best of all, the museum itself is in an old colonial, and, unless there's a tour group milling around, you can stroll around in relative serenity and rest on one of the many benches provided (no napping). The gift shop has some modern works by well-known artists for sale.

66 Nguyen Thai Hoc St., Ba Dinh District. ✆ **04/3733-2136.** Admission 20,000VND ($1.10/75p). Daily 8:30am–5pm.

West Lake ★★ In Hanoi, West Lake is second only to Hoan Kiem as a nerve center for the city, steeped in legend and sporting several significant pagodas. Vietnam's oldest pagoda, **Tran Quoc,** was built in the 6th century and is located on Cayang Island in the middle of the lake, a beautiful setting. An actual fragment of the Bodhi tree under which Buddha achieved enlightenment was given as a gift from the prime minister of India in 1959 and now grows proudly in the main courtyard. Constructed by an early Zen sect and a famous center for dharma study, and later an imperial feasting grounds, the temple has a visitors' hall, two corridors, and a bell tower; it still houses a group of diligent monks. (They recommend not wearing shorts here, but this is not enforced.) Farther along the lake, **Quan Thanh Temple,** by the northern gate, was built during the reign of Le Thai To King (1010–28). It is dedicated to Huyen Thien Tran Vo, the god who reigned over Vietnam's northern regions. Renovated in the 19th century, the impressive temple has a triple gate, courtyard, and 3.6m (12-ft.) bronze statue of the god. West Lake is also a hub of local activity, particularly on weekends when families go paddle-boating here.

Bordered by Thuy Khue and Thanh Nien sts., Ba Dinh District. No fee. Park is always open.

Dong Da District

Temple of Literature and National University (Van Mieu–Quoc Tu Giam) ★★ If Vietnam has a seat of learning, this is it. There are two entities here: Van Mieu, a temple built to worship Chinese philosopher Confucius in 1070; and Quoc tu Giam, literally "Temple of the King Who Distinguished Literature," an elite institute established in 1076 to teach the doctrines of Confucius and his disciples. It existed for

more than 700 years as a center for Confucian learning. Moreover, it is a powerful symbol for the Vietnamese, having been established after the country emerged from a period of Chinese colonialism that lasted from 179 b.c. to a.d. 938. It's a testament to the strong cultural heritage of the Mandarins; as such, it stands for independence and a solidifying of national culture and values.

What exists today is a series of four courtyards that served as an entrance to the university. Architecturally, it is a fine example of classic Chinese with Vietnamese influences. Still present are 82 stone stelae—stone diplomas, really—erected between 1484 and 1780, bearing the names and birthplaces of 1,306 doctoral laureates who managed to pass the university's rigorous examinations. Beyond the final building, known as the sanctuary, the real university began. Damaged in the French war, it is currently being restored.

Quoc Tu Giam St., Dong Da District. ✆ **04/3845-2917.** Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p); 3,000VND (15¢/10p) for English-language brochure. Daily 7:30am–5:30pm.

Hoan Kiem District

Hanoi Opera House This gorgeous Art Nouveau building was built near the turn of the 20th century. Unfortunately, to get inside, you'll have to attend a performance, but that should be enjoyable as well (see "Hanoi After Dark," p. 303).

1 Trang Tien St. (at Le Thanh Tong St.), Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3933-0113.**

Hoa Lo Prison (Hanoi Hilton) ★★ For sheer gruesome atmosphere alone, this ranks near the top of the must-see list. It was constructed by the French in 1896 mainly to house political prisoners; the Vietnamese took it over in 1954. It was subsequently used to house prisoners of war. From 1964 to 1973, it was a major POW detention facility. U.S. Sen. John McCain was a particularly famous inmate, as was Pete Peterson, the ambassador to Vietnam, and Lt. Everett Alvarez, officially the first American pilot to be shot down over Vietnam. Their stories are told from the Vietnamese perspective in photographs and writings grouped in one small room. To the west is the guillotine room, still with its original equipment, and the female and Vietnamese political prisoners' quarters. The courtyard linking the two has parts of original tunnels once used by a hundred intrepid Vietnamese revolutionaries to escape in 1945. Only part of the original complex is left; the rest of the original site was razed and is ironically occupied by a tall, gleaming office complex popular with foreign investors. There are basic English explanations, but this is a good spot to have a guide, who is certain to be armed with a tale or two.

1 Hoa Lo St., off Quan Su St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3824-6358.** Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Tues–Sun 8–11:30am and 1:30–4:30pm.

National Museum of Vietnamese History This is an exhaustive repository of Vietnamese historic relics nicely displayed with some bare-bones explanations in English. Housed in a building that was the French consulate until 1910 and a museum in various incarnations since, the collection walks you from prehistoric artifacts and carvings to funerary jars and some very fine examples of Dong Son drums from the north, excavations of Han tombs, Buddhist statuary, and everyday items of early history. It's the kind of place where schoolchildren are forced to go (be careful if you see buses out front), and for anyone but history buffs, you might feel just as bored as the kids. For those on any kind of historical mission in Vietnam, it's best to contact a tour agency and book a knowledgeable guide for an excellent overview and a good beginning to any trip.

1 Trang Tien St. (just east of the opera house), Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3825-3518.** Admission 20,000VND ($1.10/75p). Tues–Sun 8–11:30am and 1:30–4:30pm.

Old Quarter and Hoan Kiem Lake ★★★ The Old Quarter evolved from workshop villages clustered by trades, or guilds, in the early 13th century. It's now an area of narrow, ancient, winding streets, each named for the trade it formerly featured. Even today, streets tend to be for silk, silver, or antiques. It's a fascinating slice of centuries-old life in Hanoi, including markets that are so pleasantly crowded that the street itself narrows to just a few feet.

Hoan Kiem is considered the center of the city. It is also known as the Lake of the Recovered Sword. In the mid–15th century, the gods gave emperor Le Thai To a magical sword to defeat Chinese invaders. While the emperor was boating on the lake one day, a giant tortoise reared up and snatched the sword, returning it to its rightful owners and ushering peace into the kingdom. Stroll around the lake in the early morning or evening to savor local life among the willow trees and see elders playing chess or practicing tai chi. In the center of the lake is the Tortoise Pagoda; on the northern part is Ngoc Son Pagoda, reachable only by the Bridge of the Rising Sun.

Bordered by Tran Nhat Duat and Phung Hung sts., Hoan Kiem District. Daily 8am–5pm.

Quan Su Pagoda ★ Quan Su is one of the most important temples in the country. Constructed in the 15th century along with a small house for visiting Buddhist ambassadors, in 1934 it became the headquarters of the Tonkin Buddhist Association and today it is headquarters for the Vietnam Central Buddhist Congregation. The active pagoda is usually thronged with worshipers; the interior is dim and smoky with incense. To the rear is a school of Buddhist doctrine. For good luck (or for fun), visitors of any stripe are welcome to buy sticks of incense and make offerings at the various altars and sand urns. It's easy to just follow suit, and folks will be glad to show you what to do.

73 Quan Su St. (at intersection with Tran Hung Da), Hoan Kiem District. Daily 8–11am and 1–4pm.

Outside the City Center

Vietnam Ethnology Museum ★★ To learn more about the 53 ethnic minorities populating Vietnam's hinterlands, make the jaunt out to this sprawling compound (go by cab). The different ethnic groups' history and customs are explained in photos, videos, and displays of clothing and daily implements. Out back are a number of re-creations of the village homes, from a low Cham house to the towering peak of a thatched Banhar communal home. You'll come away with a good historical perspective on the many groups in the far north and in parts of neighboring Laos and Thailand.

Nguyen Van Huyen, 6km (3¾ miles) west of town. ✆ **04/3756-2193.** Admission 25,000VND ($1.40/95p). Tues–Sun 8:30am–5:30pm.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Wake up early and join the hordes of people doing tai chi, stretching, walking, and running in the parks of Hanoi. This town is a great place for people-watching and a little morning wake-up; the best spots are near the Botanical Gardens, Lenin Park, and Hoan Kiem Lake. Get your run in before about 6:30am, though, before traffic starts to snarl. Or rent a bicycle from almost any hotel for about $1 (65p) a day.

SHOPPING

Hanoi is a fine place to shop for silk, silver, lacquerware, embroidered goods, and ethnic minority crafts. Silk is of good quality and an easy buy. Shops will tailor a suit in as little as 24 hours, but allow yourself extra time for alterations. Many of the shops are clustered along **Hang Gai Street,** also called "Silk Street," on the northeast side of the Old Quarter.

A silk suit will run from about $35 to $75 (£23–£50), depending on the silk, and a blouse or shirt will cost $15 to $20 (£10–£13). Virtually every shop accepts MasterCard and Visa. Bargain hard for all but the silk; offer 50% of the asking price and end up paying 70% or so.

Khai Silk, with branches in various hotel lobbies and at 96 Hang Gai St. (✆ **04/3825-4237**) and 121 Nguyen Thai Hoc St. (✆ **04/3823-3508**), is justly famous for its selection, silk quality, and relatively pleasant store layout. Also try **Thanh Ha Silk** (114 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3928-5348**) and **Oriental House** (28 Nha Chung; ✆ **04/3828-5542**). **Tan My** (109 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3826-7081**) has exquisite embroidery work, especially for children's clothing and bedding. **F Silk** (82 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3928-6786**) features a fine line of silk ready-to-wear. Near the Sheraton, check out the high-end boutiques along Xuan Dieu Street, such as **So 9** (✆ **04/7316-0400**), where you can also make an appointment for massage therapy from a certified therapist.

For decorative items and souvenirs, shopping is chockablock on the streets surrounding Hoan Kiem Lake. One good place to start is **Nha Tho Street,** also called "Church Street" since it terminates at the town's largest cathedral. Here you'll discover silk and houseware designers among the quiet cafes. Unique lacquerware and furnishings can be found at **Delta Deco** or **La Casa** (12 Nha Tho St.; ✆ **04/3828-9616;** www.lacasavietnam.com). Nearby, **Indochine House** (13 Nha Tho St.; ✆ **04/3824-8071**) has a good selection of handicrafts and souvenirs. These are just a few of the many options here.

Some standout local labels include **Ipa-Nima** (34 Han Thuyen St.; ✆ **04/3933-4000**), a whimsical bag boutique whose wares have been featured in *Vogue* and stocked by Bergdorf's and Bendel's. **Tina Sparkle** (18 Nha Tho St.; ✆ **04/3928-7616**) is their sister store on Church Street. Nearby **Song** (27 Nha Tho St.; ✆ **04/3928-8733**) offers an array of resortlike cotton and hemp separates. Song's international clout: It's carried by Saks in the U.S.

For fine ceramics, look to **Quang's Ceramics** (95 Ba Trieu St.; ✆ **04/3945-4235**) in the Old Quarter. Wood, stone, and brass lacquer reproduction sculptures of religious icons are sold at **KAF Traditional Sculptures and Art Accessories** (31B Ba Trieu St.; ✆ **04/3822-0022**).

ART GALLERIES Vietnam has a flourishing art scene, and Hanoi has many galleries featuring oil, silk, watercolor, and lacquer paintings. Don't forget to bargain here. Keep in mind that any paintings you buy are not originals, but copies of works by well-known Vietnamese artists.

Galleries are chockablock in the Old Quarter and on the perimeters of Hoan Kiem. Try **Linh Gallery** (13 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3928-7013;** www.vangallery.com) or **Van Gallery,** its sister shop on Trang Tien near the Dan Chu Hotel. Nearby **Green Palm Gallery** (110 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **091/3321-8496;** www.greenpalmgallery.com) is an excellent gallery with reliable selections and knowledgeable staff.

54 Traditions Gallery ★ (30 Hang Bun St.; ✆ **04/3715-0194;** www.54traditions.com) is the best, arguably the only, place to buy minority art pieces. It an ethnographic museum, library, and gallery all rolled into one.

Others include **Thanh Mai** (64 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3825-1618**), **Apricot Gallery** (40B Hang Bong St.; ✆ **04/3828-8965**), and **Thang Long** (41 Hang Gai St.; ✆ **04/3825-0740**) in the Old Quarter.

BOOKSTORES For foreign books in Hanoi, check out the **Bookworm** (4B Yen The St.; ✆ **04/3747-8778**), a longtime expat favorite, or one of the many shops lining Trang Tien or Ma May streets, where you'll find backpacker book repositories and some good

deals on photocopied bootlegs. Also try the few similar shops on Bao Khan Street, a popular nightlife area.

CONVENIENCE STORES To pick up good snacks for a long train or bus ride, check out **Intimex** (22–23 Le Thai To St.; ✆ **04/3825-6148**), a spiffy grocery down a small alley on the west side of Hoan Kiem Lake. For Western wines and canned products from home, try the aptly named **Western Canned Foods** (66 Ba Trieu; ✆ **04/3822-9217**), just south of Hoan Keim.

HANOI AFTER DARK

When it comes to nightlife, Hanoi is no Saigon, but there are a variety of pleasant watering holes about town as well as a few rowdy dance spots.

Hanoi is also the best city in which to see **traditional Vietnamese arts** such as opera, theater, and water-puppet shows. Invented during the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225), the art of water puppetry is unique to Vietnam. The puppets are made of wood and really do dance on water. The shows feature traditional Vietnamese music and depict folklore and myth. Book tickets for the popular puppets at least 5 hours ahead.

Real cinema (and absinthe) can be found at **Hanoi Cinematheque** (22A Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **04/3824-4433**), near Hoan Kiem Lake.

The Performing Arts

The **Hanoi Opera House,** or Hanoi Municipal Theatre (1 Trang Tien St., Hoan Kiem District; ✆ **04/3933-0113;** www.ticketvn.com), hosts performances by local and international artists. The **Hanoi Traditional Opera** (15 Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Ba Dinh District; ✆ **04/3943-7361**) has shows on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8pm.

Central Circus (in Lenin Park, Hai Ba Trung District; ✆ **04/3822-0277**) has shows at 8pm every day except Monday. It's a real circus done on a small scale, so see it only if you're desperate to entertain the kids.

Thang Long Water Puppet Theater ★★★ Finds This might sound like one for the kids, but there is something enchanting about the lighthearted comedy and intricately skilled puppetry of this troupe. They perform numerous vignettes of daily life in the countryside as well as ancient tales, including the legend of Hoan Kiem Lake and the peaceful founding of the city of Hanoi. Puppeteers use bamboo poles to extend their puppets from behind the proscenium and up through the surface of a small pond that forms the stage. You will be amazed at their ingenuity, and it doesn't take much to suspend disbelief and get caught up in a magical hour of escape. The kids will like it, too. In high season, buy tickets early. The theater is poorly slanted, which means that although seats in the front cost a bit more, you'll have a better view—and not look at the back of someone's head—from the middle or the back (pick from a seating chart at the ticket office). You'll also get a better effect of verisimilitude from the back, where it looks more real.

57B Dinh Tien Hoang St., Hoan Kiem District. ✆ **04/3825-5450.** Fax 04/3824-5117. www.thanglongwaterpuppet.org. Admission 40,000VND–60,000VND ($2.25–$3.40/£1.50–£2.25). Shows daily at 4, 5:15, 6:30, and 8pm.

Bars, Pubs & Discos

Bao Khanh Street, just down a short lane in the northwest corner of Hoan Kiem Lake (near Café des Arts), is home to lots of popular bars. Some are a bit seedy, but there are a few comfortable places. Most popular is the **Funky Monkey** (31 Hang Thung; ✆ **04/3928-6113**), which has music, pool tables, and pizzas. Also check out **Polite Pub** (5 Bao

Khanh; ✆ **04/3825-0959**), open from 5pm until 2 or 3am, and **Amazon Bar** (across from Café des Arts; ✆ **04/3928-7338**).

For a night out with the boys, the **Spotted Cow** (23C Hai Ba Trung, next to Al Fresco's; ✆ **04/3824-1028**) is a good choice—there's just drinking and darts here.

For a more upscale experience, sip a cocktail at the famous **Press Club** (59A Ly Thai To; ✆ **04/3934-0888**), or head up the street to the **Diva Café** (57 Ly Thai To; ✆ **04/3934-4088**), where bartenders put on a flambo yant fire show when preparing their special Irish coffee. Limbering up to be the next "in" spot is **Sunset Bar** (at the Inter-Continental West Lake, 1A Nghi Tam; ✆ **04/3829-3939**), an outdoor venue with a gorgeous lakeside setting.

In the heart of the Old Quarter, **Cau Lac Bo Nhac Jazz Club** (31 Luong Van Can St.; ✆ **04/3828-7890**) has no cover and offers some of the best local acts. Call ahead to see what's going on that evening.

The **ilu Bar & Lounge** (18 Duong Yen Phu, 37 Pho Duc Chinh; ✆ **04/3715-0656**) is a hidden treasure just north of the city center. Walk through the parking garage, take the elevator to the seventh floor, then climb a flight of stairs to get to ilu's spacious balcony overlooking West Lake.

Finally, the folks at **Restaurant Bobby Chinn** (p. 293), on the south end of Hoan Kiem Lake, can serve just about any cocktail. It can be a hip, late-night hangout, depending on the crowd.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HANOI

Halong Bay ★★

A Vietnamese fable tells that the towering limestone rock formations, called karst, at Halong were formed with the crash landing of a dragon sent by the gods of early Vietnamese animism to protect the country from an invading navy. The picturesque area did in fact play host to some important Vietnamese naval victories against Chinese forces, but the bay is most famous today for its UNESCO World Heritage status, its emerald-green water, and 3,000 islands of towering limestone in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The bay itself is a 4-hour drive from Hanoi; a visit usually includes an overnight stay of at least 1 night (though it can be done in a long day trip). Given the logistics, the trip is best done through an agent or with a group. If you book a tour with an overnight stay, you'll probably cruise on a junk for 4 to 6 hours along the bay, stopping to explore two grottoes. You might pause for swimming or kayaking as well. Overnight trips can cost anywhere from $16 (£10) to upwards of $150 (£100); it depends on whether you hire a bus or a private driver, where you stay, and what you eat.

Sinh Café (✆ **04/3926-1568;** www.sinhcafevn.com) does a fine job on the low end, but don't expect much. Our recommendation is to contact the helpful folks at **Buffalo Tours** (✆ **04/3828-0702;** www.buffalotours.com/jewel). Its high-end boat, *Jewel of the Bay,* runs overnight trips that include kayaking, touring, and fine dining. Buffalo is just one of the best of a handful of operators;**Handspan** (✆ **04/3962-0446;** www.handspan.com) runs similar tours from Hanoi, and **HuangHai** (www.halongtravels.com) manages a fleet of junks.

For a luxury experience on the water, look no further than the ***Halong Ginger.*** Unlike the *Emeraude* (see below), *Halong Ginger* is a small, intimate affair. The boat is equipped with only 10 cabins pushed to either side of a central deck to ensure each room has a private, unobstructed view of the ocean. You can book through their website at www.cruisehalong.com or offices (✆ **04/3984-2807;** fax 04/3984-2609). You should save

around 25% if you book through a travel agent. ***Halong Jasmine*** was added in late 2007—rooms on this larger junk are bigger and some have private balconies. The company's next venture, ***Halong Violet,*** should be running by the time you read this.

The other high-end experience is aboard the ***Emeraude,*** a copy of a French steamer that once plied these waters in the early 20th century. *Emeraude*'s 55m (180-ft.) boat offers real luxury in each of its 38 cabins, and it comes with prices to match. The 2-day, 1-night cruise is well worth it, though. Go to www.emeraude-cruises.com, or contact the offices at the Press Club in Hanoi (✆ **04/3934-0888;** fax 04/3934-0899).

Ecotourism is taking off here, and the steep karst outcrops of the bay are not only beautiful, but also ideal for exploration. You might want to consider one of the 2- or 3-day **sea-kayaking** adventures becoming popular here. Contact Buffalo Tours or Handspan for memorable packages starting from $155 (£103) for multiday trips.

Cuc Phuong National Park

Cuc Phuong, established in 1962 as Vietnam's first national park, is a lush mountain rainforest with more than 250 bird and 60 mammal species, including tigers, leopards, and the unique red-bellied squirrel. The park's many visitors—and poachers—might keep you from the kind of wildlife experience you might hope for in the brush, however. It's still the perfect setting for a good hike, and the park features goodies such as a 1,000-year-old tree, a waterfall, and Con Moong Cave, where prehistoric human remains have been discovered. Cuc Phuong is a good day trip from Hanoi, and some tourist cafes offer programs for as little as $20 (£13) if you have four people in your group. It is also possible to overnight here in the park headquarters.

Hoa Lu

From a.d. 968 to 1010, Hoa Lu was the capital of Vietnam under the Dinh Dynasty and the first part of the Le Dynasty. Located in a valley surrounded by awesome limestone formations, it's known as the inland Halong Bay—it's a similarly picturesque sight, but much easier to reach. Most of what remains of the kingdom are ruins, but there are still temples in the valley that were renovated in the 17th century. The first honors Dinh Tien Hoang and has statues of the king. The second is dedicated to Le Dai Hanh, one of Dinh's generals and the first king of the Le Dynasty, who grabbed power in 980 after Dinh was mysteriously assassinated. Hoa Lu can easily be seen on a day trip from Hanoi. Seat-in-coach tours from a tourist cafe run about $12 (£8) per person.

5 SAPA ★★★ & THE FAR NORTH

The north and northwest highland regions are popular destinations for hardy travelers. In addition to the breathtaking **Tonkinese Alps** and off-the-map destinations such as **Dien Bien Phu,** one of the main attractions are the **villages of the ethnic minority hill tribes.**

Sapa is a small market town that has been a gathering spot for many local hill tribes for nearly 200 years. Hmong and Yao people, among others, still come here to conduct trade, socialize, and attend an ephemeral **"love market"** where young men and women choose one another for marriage (these days, it's not likely you'll see anything but a staged re-creation of it). Seeing this, French missionaries as early as 1860 said "Mon Dieu!" and set up camp to save souls; their stone church still stands sentinel and is well attended at the center of town. Sapa, with its mercifully cool climate, later became a holiday escape

for French colonists, complete with rail connection, upscale hotels, and a tourist bur eau as early as 1917. The outpost was r etaken by the Vietnamese in 1950 and attacked and destroyed later b y the F rench, follo wed b y a brief occupation b y Chinese tr oops. The town reopened for tourism in the 1990s.

Now connected b y luxury train with H anoi, Sapa boasts good accommodations and is a great jumping-off point for trekking and ecotours. Even a 1- or 2-day trip, bracketed by overnight train journeys from Hanoi, will give you a unique glimpse of local hill-tribe culture. Trek out to nearby villages with or without a guide, or meet with the many hill-tribe people who come to to wn to sell their war es. H ill-tribe costumes ar e color ful embroidered tunics embellished with heavy silv er ornaments that signify marital status or place in the gr oup's hierarchy.

Finally, the Tonkinese Alps ar e a feast for the ey es: The hills striated b y terraced rice farms in v ast, green valleys ar e like a stair way up to **Mount Fansipan,** Southeast Asia's tallest mountain, which, at 3,143m (10,309 ft.), smiles do wn on all the pr oceedings. ***Note:*** Bring a few layers here, as it can get quite chilly, especially in the winter months.

GETTING THERE

BY TRAIN The ***Victoria Express*** train from Hanoi to Sapa—with wood-paneled luxury sleeping cars and a r estaurant billed as the finest dining betw een the two to wns—is an exciting new option. Trains depart four times per week with a similar return schedule, making possible convenient 2- or 3-day trips with overnight transport. Prices range from $115 (£77) for a midweek round-trip in superior class to $290 (£193) in a delux e compartment on the w eekend. Contact the Victoria Sapa Resort (✆ **20/3871-522;** www.victoriahotels-asia.com) for details and r eservations.

A number of standard and tourist trains also make the overnight run from Hanoi. You can make arrangements with any trav el agent for a small fee, or do it y ourself at the **Hanoi Railway Station** (120 Le D uan; ✆ **04/3942-3949**), located wher e the w estern edge of Hoan Kiem District meets Dong Da District. Prices range from $16 (£11) for a hard ber th to $30 (£20) for a soft ber th with air-conditioning. Trains passing thr ough Lao Cai also continue nor th and make connections in China. (***Note:*** This requires a Chinese visa.)

To get to Sapa from the train station in Lao Cai, you'll need to transfer by bus for the 2-hour ride. This can mean anything fr om a 25,000VND ($1.40/95p) far e in a rattle-trap Russian cast-off, or a price of $40 (£27) for a ride in a Japanese Pajero Mini (SUV). The road is cut into the hillside and is bumpy and windy , but the vie ws of the terraced rice farms of the valley are beautiful as you ascend.

Note: All trains to S apa leave from the **Hanoi Railway Station** at 120 Le D uan St., often confused with H anoi's other station. B e sure to sho w your taxi driv er the corr ect address.

BY BUS Hanoi's tourist cafes all r un fr equent buses to S apa for $12 (£8) one-way . Some include Sapa in larger tours of the nor th. You get what y ou pay for, though—the train is still the best option.

BY CAR Any tourist cafe or trav el agent in H anoi can arrange trips b y private jeep or a combo jeep-and-train tour. Apart from Sapa, the vast tracts of the north are untouristed and best visited with a tour company. Look under "Visitor Information & Tours" in the Hanoi section (p. 283). **Ann Tours, Buffalo Tours,** and **Handspan** all offer comprehensive itineraries. Avoid the temptation to book budget tours with the tourist cafes, especially for areas off the beaten track.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

There are a few storefront Internet cafes on Cau May Street in Sapa. All hotels provide exchange service for traveler's checks and even credit card cash advances.

For tours and trekking in the region, the Danish outfit **Topas Travel** (26 Cau May, Sapa; ✆ **020/3871-331;** fax 020/3871-596; www.topas.dk/vietnam), with offices worldwide and experienced guides, is a great option. Whether it's a day trek to nearby villages, an extended tour with homestays in villages, or the 5-day push to the top of Fansipan, these guys can cover it.

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive

Topas Eco-Lodge ★★ Set atop a hill overlooking terraced rice fields 18km (11 miles) from now-bustling Sapa, the Eco-Lodge's biggest assets are peace and quiet—in nearly no other place in all of Vietnam can you experience silence like this. Each villa is made of locally quarried stone and blond wood. Decks overlook the deep valleys and plunging mountains of Sapa, and the few other residences you'll see are those of the hill tribes, far in the distance. When night falls, darkness is complete, and the only light comes from the stars overhead and a few wood fires down in the valley. At the Eco-Lodge, simplicity is the rule: Each villa is powered by solar panels. All guests eat the same dish at mealtime, with vegetables that come from the lodge's own garden. Make reservations by e-mail or fax only.

16 Pham Xuan Huan, Sapa District, Lao Cai Province. ✆ **020/3872-404.** Fax 020/3872-405. www.topasecolodge.com. info@topas-eco-lodge.com. 25 units. $140–$150 (£93–£100) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk (trek arrangements); guides. *In room:* No phone.

Victoria Sapa Resort ★★★ This is Sapa's crème de la crème and one of the nicest rural resorts in Indochina, set on a small hill with panoramic views of the town. The standards here, from the comfortable rooms and fine dining to the incredible hilltop health club and pool, are without rival. Situated around a cozy courtyard, all bedrooms have balconies and wood floors offset by saturated wall colors, cane and fine wooden finishes, and local weavings and artwork that remind guests of the local hill-tribe culture. The bathrooms are large, with granite counters, wood fixtures, and even a small heater to warm up the tiles. If you're here with the kids, you'll appreciate the huge family rooms, with up to six beds and bunks (they can rearrange them). Suites feature elegant canopy beds and sitting areas. With amenities including a billiards table, comfortable reading nooks, and scenic viewing points here and there, this hotel is so inviting that many prolong their stay. Don't miss having at least one meal in the Tavanh restaurant (p. 308).

At the top of the hill overlooking town, Sapa District, Lao Cai Province. ✆ **020/3871-522.** Fax 020/3871-539. www.victoriahotels-asia.com. 77 units. $195–$205 (£130–£137) double; $295 (£197) suite. Promotional rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; indoor/outdoor heated pool; tennis court; health club; sauna; kids' playroom; tour desk (trek arrangements w/Topas); car rental; salon; massage; babysitting; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms; Internet access. *In room:* Satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Bamboo Sapa Hotel This good budget standby is a large concrete block near the town center. Just more than 4 years old, its rooms are clean and spacious, done in shiny tile. Most have balconies, and all are oriented to the valley view. Shower-in-room–style bathrooms are large and clean; mattresses are sturdy, firm foam; and the staff is quite

friendly. A good in-house tour operator, **Sapa Trekking Tour,** can plan any trip. An open-air restaurant under the lobby holds fun cultural dance shows.

Cau May St., Sapa, Lao Cai Province. ✆ **020/3871-075.** Fax 020/3871-945. www.sapatravel.com. 60 units. $49–$69 (£33–£46). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; bicycle rental; tour desk; car rental; laundry service. *In room:* TV, minibar, hair dryer, safe.

Chau Long Sapa Hotel ★ A tour-group favorite, the Chau Long has the look of an old hilltop castle in Europe, but that's just the facade. Rooms are none too special, but they are cleanly crafted in dark wood and come with small, tidy bathrooms. Most units have balconies with good views—but despite the hotel's location down a quaint off-the-main-drag street, those views are now blocked in part by new hotels, so ask to see the room before checking in. The friendly staff will bend over backward to make your stay fun. The rooftop restaurant is a unique place to have a spot of grog and take in the valley below.

24 Dong Loi, Sapa, Lao Cai Province. ✆ **020/3871-245.** Fax 020/3871-844. www.chaulonghotel.com. 95 units. $115–$180 (£77–£120) double; $210 (£140) suite. Discount Internet rates available. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool; spa; Jacuzzi; steam room; car rental; limited room service; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Cat Cat Guesthouse The view: That's what it's all about here. At this basic guesthouse, buildings are stacked like an unlikely pile of children's blocks against a steeply sloping hill. At the top of the hill is a large guesthouse block and popular restaurant. Rooms are concrete and plain—a backpacker's standard—but most have big windows, balconies, and fireplaces. Stop for a coffee even if you don't stay the night; the bar here has the best view in town.

Cat Cat Rd. (at the base of the town on the way down to the Cat Cat Village), Lao Cai Province. ✆ **020/3871-387.** Fax 020/3871-133. catcathotelst@yahoo.com. 16 units. $10–$25 (£6.65–£17) double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* Satellite TV.

Royal Hotel ★ It's backpacker central at this little five-story tower in the heart of town, the very terminus of central Cau May Street. The sparse tile-and-concrete decor, busy hallways, and hit-or-miss service are a bit of a turnoff. The hotel's Friendly Café is aptly named, though; the waitstaff here seems to have been hired based on their desire (read: not ability) to speak English, and the food is good, basic traveler fare (fried rice, fried noodles, and beer). Every room has a balcony; some even come with a fireplace. Ask about Royal trains and travel services.

Cau May St., Sapa, Lao Cai Province. ✆/fax **020/3871-313.** 24 units. $16–$30 (£11–£20) double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; laundry service. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

Tavanh ★★ FRENCH/VIETNAMESE This is the most elegant dining in the Tonkinese Alps. The menu is rich with imports; everything from lamb to salmon steaks is shipped in. Tavanh serves all the right dishes to keep you warm on a chilly eve; be sure to try the cheese fondue. There are good Vietnamese specials on an evolving menu, and the pastas are homemade and delicious. The romantic, candlelit dining room is done up with burgundy walls, rich wood floors, a central fireplace, and local hangings.

At the Victoria Sapa Resort, at the top of the hill overlooking town. ✆ **020/3871-522.** Main courses $8–$45 (£5.30–£30). AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–10pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The town itself is the attraction here. Sapa's small alleys are eminently strollable, and a short walk in any direction offers great views. On any given day, **Cau May Street** (the main drag) and the **central market area** are teeming with hill-tribe folks in their spangled finery, putting on the hard sell for some great weaving, fine silver work, and interesting trinkets such as mouth harps and flutes. Especially on the weekend, it can be quite a scene. On the high end of Cau May is the **Mission Church** ★, an aging stone edifice. This was the church of the early French missionaries and is still a popular meeting point for locals. Masses are held on Saturday night and throughout the day on Sunday.

At the base of the hill below the town of Sapa is **Cat Cat Village** ★, with a small waterfall that makes a good spot to kick back. This Hmong village is accessible by road most of the way, and cement path for the rest. The whole trip can be made in just a few hours and offers a unique glimpse of rural life. Admission (paid at the top of the hill) is 20,000VND ($1.10/75p). You can either walk all the way down or hire a motorbike or car taxi for pickup and drop-off.

The premier day trip in this area is from **Lao Cai to Ta Van** ★, a good opportunity to traipse around the rice terraces and experience a bit of rural village life. Hire a car or motorbike for the 9km (5½-mile) ride down the valley from Sapa to the Hmong village of Lao Cai (some folks even walk it); it's a nice ride in itself, with great views of the lush terraces. From there, follow the valley for a few miles to the next town of Ta Van. The short trek leads through the picturesque hill-tribe villages of Hmong, Zay, and Dao people. It's good to have a guide along to explain any customs and perhaps translate for you. You're sure to see other tourists on the trail (which puts many people off), but this is a good example of the many great treks in the area. Ask at your hotel or contact **Topas Travel** (✆ **020/3871-331;** www.topas.dk/vietnam) for longer, less touristy options. Drop-off at Lao Cai and later pickup at Tavanh will cost about $4 (£2.65) by motorbike taxi or $25 (£17) by jeep; contact any hotel for a guide.

If you're heading even farther north from Sapa, some 100km (62 miles) from town is the very popular **Bac Ha Market,** a more authentic version of Sapa's love market, held early on Sunday mornings. **Mai Chau,** a gorgeous valley, is home to ethnic Tai people; it's about 4 hours from Hanoi. **Dien Bien Phu,** to the far northwest, is a former French commercial and military outpost, as well as the site of one of Vietnam's biggest military victories over the French. You can fly directly to Dien Bien Phu from Hanoi.

6 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CENTRAL COAST

Many of Vietnam's most significant historic sights and some of its best beaches are clustered along its central coast. Popular destinations are **Hue,** the former Vietnamese capital, with its Imperial City and emperors' tombs, and **Hoi An,** a historic trading town with many original 17th-century buildings. Formerly the seat of the Cham kingdom from the 2nd through 14th centuries, the central coast also has the greatest concentration of Cham relics and art. Transport between each of these nearby towns is quite good.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE You can fly into both Hue and Danang from Saigon or Hanoi.

BY TRAIN Both Hue and Danang are stops on the north-south rail line.

Who Are the Cham?

With little written history, what we do know of the Cham is from Chinese written texts and from the splendid religious art attributed to the Cham Empire (note the many Khmer-style Prang towers scattered along Vietnam's central coastline). Migrating from Indonesia, the Cham people settled in central Vietnam in the 2nd century A.D. and fought Chinese incursions from their stronghold in and around Danang.

The Cham belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language family and have their own Sanskrit-based script. Cham communities lived by rice farming, fishing, and trading pepper, cinnamon bark, ivory, and wood with neighboring nations via Hoi An. Hinduism was their dominant religion, with Buddhist influences and an infusion of Islam starting in the 14th century. In the middle of the 10th century, internal warfare, as well as battles against both Khmer to the south and Dai Viet to the north, began to erode the Cham kingdom. By the mid–15th century, it had been almost entirely absorbed into Vietnam.

The Cham today are an ethnic minority; many are still Hindu, but many have converted to Islam. Cham enclaves subsist by fishing, farming, and sales of handicrafts. The premier Cham site is at **My Son** (see "Side Trips from Hoi An," p. 337), but other Cham sites can be found near Nha Trang and as far south as Phan Thiet. The best Cham artifacts are on view at the Cham Museum (p. 323).

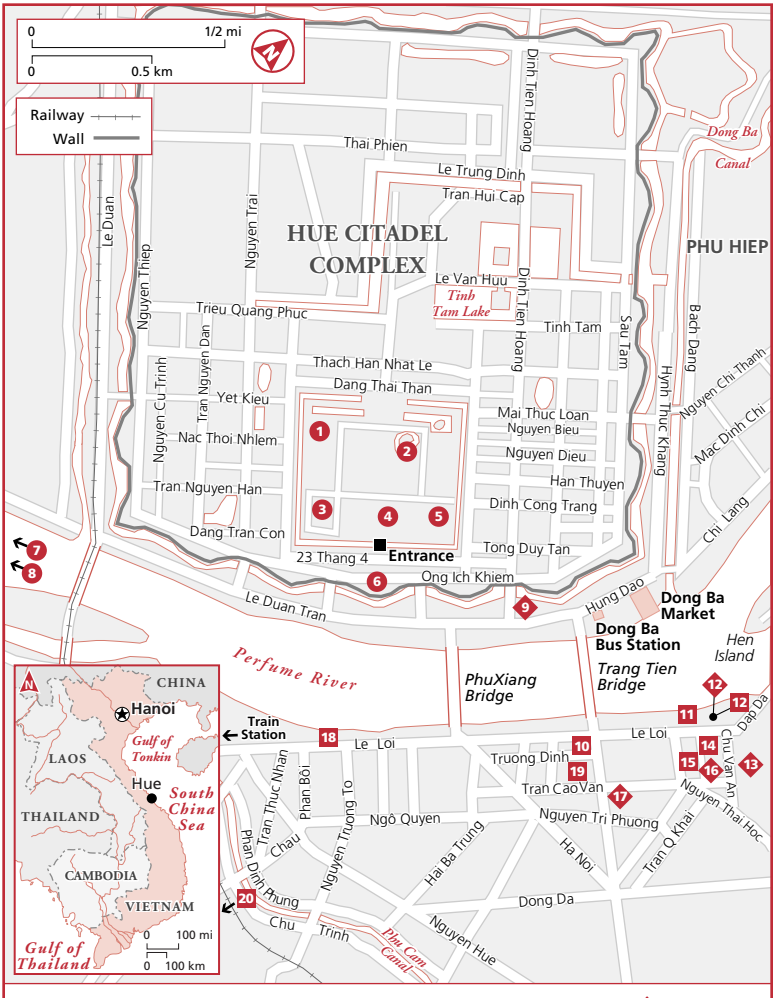
BY CAR/BUS/MINIVAN Tourist-cafe buses connect all major towns in this region. Traveling with a rented vehicle and driver is possible, but will probably cost several hundred dollars and leave your teeth chattering from the bumpy roads.

GETTING AROUND

The three main coastal towns in the central part of the country are linked by roads that are prone to flooding, and traffic can be heavy but the roads are in better shape now than before. You can easily rent a car or get a seat on a bus or minivan in any of the towns or through a hotel or booking agency. The trip from Hue to Danang is about 3 1/2 hours; from Danang to Hoi An, about 90 minutes. See individual city listings, later in this chapter, for suggested prices.

7 HUE ★★

Hue (pronounced *hway*) was once Vietnam's Imperial City, the capital of the country from 1802 to 1945 under the Nguyen Dynasty, and is culturally and historically significant. While much of Hue—tragically including most of Vietnam's walled Citadel and Imperial City—was decimated during the French and American wars, there is still much to see. Perhaps most captivating is simply observing daily life on the **Perfume River,** its many dragon boats, houseboats, and longtail vessels dredging for sand. You can visit many of the attractions, including the **tombs of Nguyen Dynasty emperors,** by boat.



ACCOMMODATIONS
- Century Riverside Hotel **11**
- Hoa Hong Hotel **15**
- Hotel Saigon Morin **10**
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- Citadel & Imperial City **1**
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- Hoa Mai Restaurant **12**
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- Mandarin Café **17**
- Tropical Garden **13**

The enjoyable town has a seaside-resort sort of air, with a laid-back attitude; low-slung, colorful, colonial-style buildings; and strings of lights at outdoor cafes. There are many local cuisine specialties to sample as well.

You might want to plan for a full-day **American war memorial excursion** to the nearby demilitarized zone **(DMZ),** the beginning of the **Ho Chi Minh trail,** and underground tunnels at **Vinh Moc.**

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Vietnam Airlines** connects to Hue from both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). A taxi from the airport costs 140,000VND ($7.90/£5.25). There's also an airport bus that will drop you off and pick you up from your hotel; it covers the half-hour trip for 45,000VND ($2.55/£1.70). Book through your hotel or any tour operator.

BY TRAIN Trains to Hue depart daily from both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The trip from Hanoi to Hue takes 14 hours on the express trains, which depart nightly at 7 and 11pm; these trains have soft-berth compartments with air-conditioning for about $35 (£23). From Saigon, in a soft-berth, it's about $50 (£33), which is a good way to go.

BY CAR If you're coming from the south, Vietnamtourism Danang can arrange a car for the 3½-hour ride from Danang to Hue for $40 (£27). Contact travel agents in any section to rent a car with driver.

BY BUS Many travelers choose to take a nerve-rattling overnight bus or minivan from Hanoi to Hue. Tickets are $9 (£6) through one of Hanoi's tourist cafes; the trip takes an excruciating 17 hours. Hue is a major stop on any open-tour ticket, and open-tour cafe buses connect with Danang and Hoi An for just $3 (£2), or Nha Trang for $6 (£4); these are long, bumpy trails but are cheap and convenient.

GETTING AROUND

Taxis are much cheaper here than in Hanoi: 8,000VND (45¢/30p) starting out and 8,000VND for each kilometer thereafter. Flag 'em down or call **Gili** (✆ **054/828-282**) or **ThanhDo** (✆ **054/858-585**). Because Hue is relatively small, renting a cyclo by the hour for 15,000VND to 20,000VND (85¢–$1.10/55p–75p) also works well. Even the tiniest hotel provides motorbike rentals at $3 to $5 (£2–£3.30) per day and bicycles for $1 (65p).

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

A number of tour companies in Hue can book boat trips and visits to the DMZ for you. Every hotel will also be able to assist you, although the tour companies will be cheaper, especially for car services. Hue's most efficient group, as well as the most expensive, is the **Huong Giang Tourist Company** (17 Le Loi St.; ✆ **054/838-485;** www.charmingvietnam.com), which organizes good, personalized tours to the tombs and the DMZ at a premium (or you can join one of its group tours). A half-day tour by car and boat, with guide, to the Citadel and Thient Mu Pagoda is $25 (£17) for one, $30 (£20) for two. A private boat up the Perfume River will cost $29 (£19). On the budget end, **Sinh Café** (12 Hung Vuong St.; ✆ **054/845-022;** www.sinhcafevn.com) takes big groups upriver for $2 (£1.30) and has very reasonable junkets to the DMZ.

Fast Facts Hue

Currency Exchange Most hotels in Hue will change currency. **Vietcombank** is at 78 Hung Vuong St. (✆ **054/846-058**). The foreign exchange bank, **Vietinde,** has an office at 41 Hung Vuong St. (on the roundabout at the terminus of the main tourist drag); it can do cash advances and is also a Western Union representative.

Internet Access **Sinh Café** (7 Nguyen Tri Phuong; ✆ **054/845-022;** www.sinhcafevn.com) has good service for 10,000VND (65¢/35p) per hour. There are also many good spots on Hung Vuong (the main tourist street south of the river), Pham Ngu Lao Street (just across from the Century Riverside), and Doi Cung Street.

Mail There are mini–post offices in both the Century and Huong Giang hotels. The main post office, at 8 Hoang Hoa Tham St., is open from 7am to 9pm.

Telephones The city code for Hue is **54.** You can place IDD calls at the post office (see above) and from most hotels.

WHERE TO STAY

Considering the volume of travelers coming through this town, there isn't much in the way of quality accommodations, and even the best options are bland, with lots of "It's nice, but . . . " Budget choices abound, but there are some real duds. Always ask to see the room first, before checking in. Hotel amenities are limited, but most have basic tour services and include breakfast. Prices are flexible, so press for a discount.

Expensive

Hotel Saigon Morin ★ The Saigon Morin is a government-run, refurbished colonial block near the main bridge in town. The hotel forms a large courtyard around a central garden and pool area. A recent renovation of the third floor puts the Morin in a class of its own, with fine linens, wood floors, and stylish bathrooms that connect to the room via a fun "peekaboo" shuttered opening. The lower standard rooms, however, are still the same Chinese business-hotel basic, with old laminated furniture and threadbare carpeting dotted with cigarette burns. More than 100 years old, the Morin was originally the colonist's address of note; photos line the halls of that bygone era. The street in front of the Morin was where a young Ho Chi Minh carried his first placard in protest of foreign occupation (if he could only see the place now). The exterior maintains some of that old charm, but common areas are brash and busy, neon lit, and cluttered with souvenir stalls—all kinds of fun, though. Service is a bit hit or miss, but usually friendly.

30 Le Loi St., Hue. ✆ **054/823-526.** Fax 054/825-155. www.morinhotel.com.vn. 184 units. $120–$160 (£80–£107) double; from $250 (£167) suite. Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Outdoor buffet area; lobby restaurant; 2 bars/cafes (1 on roof w/good views); small outdoor pool; small gym; sauna; bicycle/motorbike rental; concierge; helpful in-house tour desk; car rental; salon; room service; massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Huong Giang Hotel ★ This hotel is a veritable Asian wonderland, so enamored is it of heavy carved wood and bamboo furnishings in its faux "imperial" theme. Tacky? Yes,

but also kind of fun. Standard rooms are clean and comfortable, but the bathrooms are a disappointing dormitory style, with plastic shower curtains and no counter space. Try to get a good deal on one of the Royal Suites, with carved-wood walls, grandiose furniture with inlaid mother-of-pearl, and a massive wood room divider—sort of a mini pagoda right in your room. (The words *emperor* and *bordello* both leap to mind.) The Royal Restaurant, worth a photo just for its gaudy gold-and-red-everything design alone, is for prearranged group dinners; its costumed staff serves a fancy traditional dinner at a hefty price (popular in town). The Terrace Bar is the best place in Hue to have a drink and watch life on the river. Be sure to splurge for a riverview room and enjoy a fine meal at the Hoa Mai Restaurant (reviewed below). To lay some money on a horse race, seek out the e-casino.

51 Le Loi St., Hue. ✆ **054/822-122** or 054/823-958. Fax 054/823-102. www.huonggiangtourist.com. 165 units. $100 (£67) garden-view double; $110 (£73) riverview double; $240–$300 (£160–£200) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; pool; basic health club; sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; small business center w/Internet access; cool, kitschy shopping area; salon; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, cable TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Imperial Hotel ★★ This new hotel is a gem for Hue city. Rooms are spacious and the marble entrances that segue into classic wooden floors are a nice touch. The overall decor is antique Oriental: carved wooden chairs, imperial yellow silk bed throws and accent pillows, ornate dragons carved into pillars in the lobby. Modern amenities such as flatscreen TVs and angular glass shower cubicles round out the room. Spring for a Deluxe Riverview room and request a corner unit on a higher floor—the view is fantastic. For an unrivaled lookout over the Perfume River, grab a drink at the top-floor panorama bar.

8 Hung Vuong St., Hue. ✆ **054/882-222.** Fax 054/882-244. sales@imperial-hotel.com.vn. 193 units. $159–$179 (£106–£119) city-view/riverview deluxe; from $239 (£159) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; small outdoor pool; exercise room; spa and sauna; concierge; business center; shopping; room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

La Résidence Hôtel & Spa ★★★ Once home to France's envoy to central Vietnam, or Annam, La Résidence has been rethought and added onto and is now one of the best-designed boutique hotels in the country. Warm colors and dark wood combine with unobtrusive, elegant Art Deco patterns befitting a colonial villa, while black-and-white pictures on the wall are reminiscent of Indochina. Nooks and crannies of private space abound, so a guest can easily find a quiet corner to himself. Rooms are spacious, with clean lines, parquet floors, and views of the Perfume River and the Citadel. The cuisine at Le Parfum is carefully prepared and excellent; the staff is exceptional.

5 Le Loi St., Hue. ✆ **054/837-475.** Fax 054/837-476. www.la-residence-hue.com. 122 units. $290–$386 (£193–£257) double; $426–$673 (£284–£449) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor saltwater pool; nice gym; spa; bicycle/motorbike rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; fine shopping; salon; room service; laundry service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

The Pilgrimage Village ★★ This is the place to come if you're looking for a luxurious, secluded getaway. The resort offers cozy villas and bungalows spread out over manicured grounds. The villa deluxe rooms—with spacious interiors, decadently large bathrooms, and private balconies—are excellent value. Get one on the second floor for the cabin-esque sloping roofs. Higher-end huts and bungalows come with outdoor rain showers and stone bathtubs. For a special getaway, splurge on one of the three traditional Vietnamese pool houses. The houses are more than 150 years old and were transported

here from nearby villages. They come with a bevy of perks, the best being 2 free hours of spa services *every day*. Pilgrimage Village is one of the only independently owned and operated hotels in the area. It's far from the center, but close to two of the best tombs in Hue. Unfortunately staff's level of English and assertiveness sometimes leaves something to be desired—everyone is super friendly, but they often drop the ball on simple requests. For the best Hue has to offer, it's a battle between here and La Résidence Hôtel & Spa (see above): luxurious local charm in a natural setting versus chic colonial digs with a breathless view over Perfume River. You decide.

130 Minh Mang St., Hue. ✆ **054/885-461.** Fax 054/887-057. www.pilgrimagevillage.com. 99 units. High season $160–$292 (£107–£195) villa/villa family deluxe; $237–$397 (£158–£265) bungalow/hut; $654 (£436) pool house. Low season, $146–$626 (£97–£417). AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; spacious 40m outdoor pool; exercise room w/outdated equipment; luxurious spa w/Jacuzzi and sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; free airport transfer for house, hut, and bungalow rooms; business center; shopping boutique w/handicrafts made on location; salon; room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Hoa Hong Hotel Though showing its age, the Hoa Hong has bargain rates and is a good midrange choice. Rooms are nondescript—think navy and beige, with ugly polyester spreads—but all are comfortable, with good, firm beds. The tidy bathrooms are a nice size, with tubs. Ask for a room with a city view rather than a noisy street view. The suites have authentic Asian furniture and are worth the extra cost. There are two restaurants, one of which specializes in the popular "royal dinner" theme evening, when both staff and guests dress like emperors and empresses. The lobby has a fun little bar that serves flowery umbrella drinks. Book early, as this place often fills up with tour groups.

1 Pham Ngu Lao St., Hue. ✆ **054/824-377** or 054/826-943. Fax 054/826-949. hoahonghotel@dng.vnn.vn. 50 units. $30–$60 (£20–£40) double; $80 (£53) panorama riverview suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Large restaurant; tour desk; car rental; room service; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Sports 1 Hotel This place is good value and in better shape than nearby Hoa Hong Hotel (see above). The rooms are tidy, beds are decent, and the blond faux-wood interior is pretty inviting. Bathrooms are spotless, which is a major bonus in this price range. The location puts you in the midst of backpackers, which means a good selection of local eateries and popular watering holes. Try to get one of the few rooms that have river views and a decent-size balcony.

15 Pham Ngu Lao St., Hue. ✆ **054/828-096.** Fax 054/830-199. www.huestays.com. 29 units. $20–$25 (£13–£17) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, safe.

WHERE TO DINE

Hue cuisine is unique, with a focus on light ingredients in choices such as the popular fresh spring rolls; *bun bo Hue,* a noodle soup with pork, beef, and shredded green onions; and *banh khoi,* a thin, crispy pancake filled with ground meat and crispy vegetables. Local dishes are best at street side—there are a few good spots with English menus along the river and in the backpacker area, along Hung Vong.

Moderate

Hoa Mai Restaurant ★★ VIETNAMESE Hoa Mai is decked out in kitschy bamboo furnishings and set in an open area on the top floor of the Huong Giang Hotel.

Great views of the Perfume River accompany the good Vietnamese fare. Try *banh rom hue,* triangular fried rolls stuffed with ground meat, shrimp, and vegetables. Daily special set menus are a good idea and can feature such dishes as fried cuttlefish with grapefruit, crab soup, and shrimp with fig and rice cake. Be sure to choose a table near the riverside window and away from any banquet-size setups that say reserved.

At the Huong Giang Hotel, 51 Le Loi St., 3rd floor. ✆ **054/822-122.** Main courses $2–$10 (£1.30–£6.65); set menus $10–$15 (£6.65–£10). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Tropical Garden ★★ VIETNAMESE Though a popular tour-bus stop, Tropical Garden has a nice laid-back feel. The restaurant, with a sister location called **Club Garden** just down the road (08 Vo Thi Sau St.; ✆ **054/826-327**), serves fine Vietnamese fare from an English-language menu, plus stages a live music show nightly. Even when it's packed, there are enough intimate corners that you'll feel comfortable. The place specializes in "embarrassing entrees," the kind of flaming dishes that would impress that eccentric uncle of yours (spring rolls served on toothpick skewers around the rind of a hollowed pineapple with a candle in the middle, a la a Halloween jack-o'-lantern). It's all good fun, so just go with it. The food is good, but a bit overpriced for a la carte items. Set menus are quite reasonable and walk you through some house specialties, such as the banana-flower soup, the grilled chicken with lemon leaf, and the steamed crab with beer. As an appetizer, don't miss the grilled minced shrimp with sugar cane wrapped in rice paper and served with peanut sauce—unique and delicious. Service is a bit hit-or-miss, either fawning or forgetful.

27 Chu Van An St. ✆ **054/847-143.** Fax 054/828-074. Main courses $3–$6 (£2–£4); set menus $8–$20 (£5.30–£13). AE, MC, V. Daily 8:30am–11pm.

Inexpensive

La Carambole ★★ VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL Good music is the first thing you might notice at La Carambole; I heard an unlikely mix from CCR to Beck on one relaxing evening. The decor is cheerful: cool indirect lighting, red tablecloths, and playful mobiles hanging from the ceiling, all as welcoming as the kind waitstaff. The French proprietor, Christian, and his wife, Ha, will certainly make you feel at home, and the comfort items on the menu—spaghetti, burgers, pizzas, and various French-style meat-and-potatoes specials—will stick to your ribs. The set menus are a good deal (salad and pizza at $5/£3.30, for example), and portions are ample. There's a game table, and you're sure to meet lots of other travelers here.

19 Pham Ngu Lao St. ✆ **054/810-491.** Fax 054/826-234. Main courses 30,000VND–140,000VND ($1.70–$7.90/£1.10–£5.25); set menus $6–$10 (£4–£6.65). No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

Mandarin Café ★ VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL In a busy storefront just a short walk from the riverside (near the Hotel Saigon Morin), Mandarin is always full of young backpackers, and for a reason: Good, affordable Vietnamese fare, predominantly one-dish items such as fried rice or noodles, top a roster of comfort foods. Have a banana pancake and be one with the universe. Owner Mr. Cu (pronounced *Coo*) is a practiced photographer; his works, classic images of rural Vietnam, line the walls and are for sale as postcards or prints. For the amateur shutterbug, the images are inspiring, and the best part is that Mr. Cu is more than happy to share secrets and talk shop. Come here for both a casual meal and conversation with fellow travelers.

3 Hung Vuong St. ✆ **054/821-281.** mandarin@dng.vnn.vn. Main courses 10,000VND–50,000VND (55¢–$2.80/35p–£1.90). AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–10pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO IN THE CITADEL & IMPERIAL CITY ★★★

The Citadel is often used as a catchall term for Hue's Imperial City, built by Emperor Gia Long beginning in 1804 for the exclusive use of the emperor and his household, much like Beijing's Forbidden City. The city actually encompasses three walled enclosures: the Exterior Exclosure, or **Citadel;** the Yellow Enclosure, or **Imperial City,** within that; and, in the very center, the **Forbidden Purple City,** where the emperor actually lived. The Citadel itself is a square 2km (1¼-mile) wall, 7m (14 ft.) high and 20m (66 ft.) thick, with 10 gates. Ironically, it was constructed by a French military architect, though it failed to prevent the French from destroying the complex many years later. The main entrance to the Imperial City is the Noon Gate (Cua Ngo Mon, the southwest gate); this is where you can get a ticket and enter the site. Admission is 55,000VND ($3.10/£2.05). Hours are daily from 7am to 5:30pm.

Flag Tower ★★ The focal point of the Imperial City, a large rampart to the south of the Noon Gate, this tower was built in 1807 during Gia Long's reign. The yellow flag of royalty was the first to fly here and was exchanged for and replaced by many others in Vietnam's turbulent history. It's a national symbol.

Forbidden Purple City ★ Once the actual home of the emperor and his concubines, this second sanctum within the Citadel is a large open area dotted with what's left of the king's court. Almost completely razed in a fire in 1947, the sanctum is now a few buildings among the rubble. The new **Royal Theater** behind the square, a look-alike of the razed original, is under construction. To the left as you head north is the partially restored **Thai Binh Reading Pavilion,** notable mostly for its beautifully landscaped surroundings, including a small lake with a Zen-like stone sculpture, and the ceramic and glass mosaic detailing on the roof and pillars, favored by flamboyant emperor Khai Dinh.

Catch a performance of the **Royal Traditional Theater** at the Hue Monuments Conservation Center. Eight performances daily, from 9am to 4pm, highlight the ancient art of *nha nhac* (courtly dance), at a cost of 20,000VND ($1.10/75p).

Imperial Tombs As befits its history as an Imperial City, Hue's environs are studded with tombs of past emperors. They are spread out over a distance, so the best way to see them is to hire a car for a half-day or take one of the many organized boat tours up the Perfume River. Altogether, there were 13 kings of the Nguyen Dynasty, although only seven reigned until their death. As befits an emperor, all had tombs of stature, some as large as a small town. Most tomb complexes usually consist of a courtyard, a stele (a large stone tablet with a biography of the emperor), a temple for worship, and a pond.

Mieu Temple ★★ Constructed in 1921 to 1922 by Emperor Minh Mang, this temple has funeral altars paying tribute to 10 of the last Nguyen Dynasty emperors, omitting two who reigned for only days, with photos of each emperor and his empress(es) and various small offerings. The two empty glass containers to the side of each photo should contain bars of gold, probably an impractical idea today.

Across from the Mieu is Hien Lam, or the Glorious Pavilion, to the far right, with the **Nine Dynastic Urns** in front. Cast from 1835 to 1837, each urn represents a Nguyen emperor and is richly embellished with all the flora, fauna, and material goods that Vietnam has to offer, mythical or otherwise.

Noon Gate (Cua Ngo Mon) ★★ One of 10 entrances to the city, this southern entrance is the most dynamic. It was the royal entrance, in fact, and was built by Emperor

Gia Long in 1823. It was used for important proclamations, such as announcements of the names of successful doctoral candidates (a list still hangs on the wall on the upper floor) and, most memorably, the announcement of the abdication of the last emperor, Bao Dai, on August 13, 1945, to Ho Chi Minh. The structure, like most here, was damaged by war but is now nicely restored, with classic Chinese roofs covering the ritual space, complete with large drums and an altar. Be sure to climb to the top and have a look at the view.

Thai Hoa Palace Otherwise known as the Palace of Supreme Harmony, this structure was built in 1833 and is the first one you'll approach at the entrance. It was used as the throne room, a ceremonial hall where the emperor celebrated festivals and received courtiers; the original throne still stands. The Mandarins sat outside. In front are two mythical *ky lin* animals, which walk without their claws ever touching the ground and have piercing eyesight for watching the emperor, tracking all good and evil he does. Note the statues of the heron and turtle inside the palace's ornate lacquered interior: The heron represents nobility and the turtle represents the working person. Folklore has it that the two took turns saving each other's lives during a fire, symbolizing that the power of the emperor rests with his people, and vice versa.

Thien Mu Pagoda ★★ Often called the symbol of Hue, Thien Mu is one of the oldest and loveliest religious structures in Vietnam. Set on the bank of the Perfume River, it was constructed beginning in 1601. The Phuoc Dien Tower in front was added in 1864 by Emperor Thieu Tri. Each of its seven tiers is dedicated to either one of the human forms taken by Buddha or the seven steps to enlightenment, depending upon whom you ask. There are also two buildings housing a bell that reportedly weighs 2 tons, plus a stele inscribed with a biography of Lord Nguyen Hoang, founder of the temple.

Once past the front gate, observe the 12 huge wooden sculptures of fearsome temple "guardians"—note the real facial hair. A complex of monastic buildings lies in the center, offering glimpses of the monks' daily routines. Stroll all the way to the rear of the complex to look at the graveyard at the base of the Truong Son mountains and to wander through the well-kept garden of pine trees. Hours are daily from 8am to 5pm, but try not to go between 11:30am and 2pm, when the monks are at lunch, because the rear half of the complex will be closed.

Tomb of Khai Dinh ★★ Emperor Khai Dinh himself wasn't particularly revered, being overly extravagant and flamboyant (reportedly he wore a belt studded with lights that he flicked on at opportune public moments). His tomb, completed in 1931, is a gaudy mix of Gothic, baroque, Hindu, and Chinese Qing Dynasty architecture at the top of 127 steep steps—a reflection of the man himself. Inside, the two main rooms are completely covered with fabulous, intricate glass and ceramic mosaics in designs reminiscent of Tiffany and Art Deco. The workmanship is astounding. The outer room's ceiling was done by a fellow who used both his feet and his hands to paint, in what some say was a sly mark of disrespect for the emperor. While in most tombs the location of the emperor's actual remains are a secret, Khai Dinh boldly placed his under his de facto tomb itself.

Admission 55,000VND ($3.10/£2.05). Summer daily 6:30am–5:30pm; winter daily 7am–5pm.

Tomb of Minh Mang ★ One of the most popular Nguyen emperors and the father of the last emperor, Bao Dai built a restrained, serene, classical temple, much like Hue's Imperial City, located at the confluence of two Perfume River tributaries. Stone sculptures surround a long walkway, lined with flowers, leading up to the main buildings.

Admission 55,000VND ($3.10/£2.05). Summer daily 6:30am–5:30pm; winter daily 7am–5pm.

Tips Taking a Boat to the Tombs

Expect to pay between $2 and $4 (£1.30–£2.65) for a shared boat ride to the temples (depending on which agent you use), *plus* 55,000VND ($3.10/£2.05) for *each* tomb. Be prepared for when the boat pulls to shore at the first two tombs; you'll have to hire one of the motorcycle taxis at the bank to shuttle you to and from the site. You will not have enough time to walk there and back, so you're basically at their mercy. Haggle as best you can—about 10,000VND (55¢/35p) is a good starting point.

Tomb of Tu Duc ★★ With the longest reign of any Nguyen Dynasty emperor, from 1848 to 1883, Tu Duc was a philosopher and scholar of history and literature. His reign was unfortunate: His kingdom unsuccessfully struggled against French colonialism, he fought a coup d'état by members of his own family, and although he had 104 wives, he left no heir. The "tomb" was constructed from 1864 to 1867 and also served as recreation grounds for the king, having been completed 16 years before his death. In fact, he actually engraved his own stele. The largest in Vietnam, at 20 tons, it has its own pavilion in the tomb. The highlight of the grounds is the lotus-filled lake ringed by frangipani trees, with a large pavilion in the center. The main cluster of buildings includes Hoa Khiem (Harmony Modesty) Pavilion, where the king worked; it still contains items of furniture and ornaments. Minh Khiem Duong, constructed in 1866, is said to be the country's oldest surviving theater. It's great fun to poke around in the wings. There are also pieces of original furniture lying here and there, as well as a cabinet with household objects: the queen's slippers, ornate chests, and bronze and silver books. The raised box on the wall is for the actors who played emperors; the real emperor was at the platform to the left.

Admission 55,000VND ($3.10/£2.05). Summer daily 6:30am–5:30pm; winter daily 7am–5pm.

SHOPPING

All along Le Loi Street, you'll see souvenir stalls that vary from the cute to the kitschy. You can find good deals on commemorative spoons and velvet Ho Chi Minhs here, but nothing too traditional or authentic. There are a few good silversmiths, however. A few tailors are based in and among the souvenir shops, or you can stop by **Seductive** (40 Le Loi St.; ✆ **054/829-794**), a small, ready-to-wear silk boutique. **Bambou Company** (21 Pham Ngu Lao St., next to La Carambole) produces unique T-shirts of local theme and design.

HUE AFTER DARK

The best view in town is at the **Imperial Hotel**'s (8 Hung Vuong St.; ✆ **054/882-222**) panorama bar. Across from the major riverside hotels is the **DMZ Café,** which stays up late like a beer-swilling frat party. Along Hung Vuong, you'll find a few backpacker bars open 'til midnight, but overall this is a pretty sleepy town. **Bar Why Not?** (21 Vo Thi Sau St.; ✆ **054/824-793**) is a cool open-air joint at the intersection of Pham Ngu Lao and Vo Thi Sau (near La Carambole); it has a good pool table and hot dogs cooked to order. **Newspace Bar** (22 Pham Ngu Lao; ✆ **054/810-310**) has a pool table fronting a chic bistro/bar setup, with a gallery space next door. **Brown Eyes** (55 Nguyen Sinh Cung; ✆ **054/827-494**) is a late-night bar and cafe that's a short taxi ride from the town center.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HUE

Except for the remains of its fabulous Imperial City, Hue in itself has sadly seen the worst of the French and American wars. Most of the star attractions other than the Citadel, therefore, involve half- or full-day trips outside the city.

The DMZ & Vinh Moc Tunnels ★★

If you're old enough to remember the Vietnam War, you'll know Hue from the large-scale battles waged there. A day trip to the nearby DMZ and Vinh Moc Tunnels is a sobering revisit to that tumultuous time.

Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, an agreement struck to bring peace to Indochina after its struggle with French colonists, Vietnam was divided into North and South along the **17th Parallel.** What was meant to be a short-term political fix became a battle line, and the 17th Parallel, aka the **DMZ** or demilitarized zone, became a tangle of barbed wire and land mines bombed and defoliated into a wasteland. Today, the area is green with growth again and completely unremarkable except for its history. Nearby are strategic sites with names you may recognize: the Rockpile, Hamburger Hill, Camp Carroll, and Khe Sanh, a former U.S. Marine base that was the site of some of the war's most vicious and deadly fighting. If you take a tour of the area, you will also visit Dakrong Bridge, an official entryway into the Ho Chi Minh trail. ***Warning:*** The route over Hwy. 9 to the sites is narrow and bumpy. Rethink this trip if it's a rainy day or if you are faint of either heart or stomach.

Most tours to the DMZ area include a visit to the **Vinh Moc Tunnels,** a site that is a testament to human tenacity. Like the tunnels in the south at Cu Chi (p. 385), soldiers and civilians took to the underground, literally, digging over 1.6km (1 mile) of tunnels from 1965 to 1966 to support Viet Cong troops and confound U.S. battalions at this strategic position near the line of north-south demarcation. Up to 20m (about 66 ft.) below the surface, multilevel tunnels formed a real community haven, with "living rooms" for families, a conference and performance room, a field hospital, and exit points inland and along the coast. Visitors walk through about 300m (984 ft.) of the tunnels in a main artery that is 1.6m high by 1.2m wide (5 1/4×4 ft.), going down three stages. It's dirty, clammy, and a bit claustrophobic—dress accordingly. A museum at the entrance has photos and testimony of survivors. Admission is 25,000VND ($1.40/95p).

These sites are some 60km (37 miles) north of Hue. Contact Hue tourist cafes such as **Sinh Café** for group excursions, or for a good private tour try **Huong Giang Tourist Company** (see "Visitor Information & Tours," earlier in this section).

Lang Co Beach

A good day stop along Route 1A between Hue and Danang/Hoi An, Lang Co Beach is a sweeping expanse of sand where you can dip your toes and take a rest en route. The absence of group tours and touts is the main draw. For a spartan but cozy overnight getaway, try the **Lang Co Beach Resort** (✆ **054/873-555;** www.huonggiangtourist.com), where stylish poolside rooms start at $85 (£57).

8 DANANG & CHINA BEACH

Danang, the fourth-largest city in Vietnam, is one of the most important seaports in the central region. It played a prominent role in the American war, serving as the landing site for the first American troops officially sent to Vietnam. Danang has nothing in the way

of charm and has no major attractions except for the **Cham Museum,** which has become just a quick stop on the tourist-cafe buses between Hoi An and Hue. **Furama Resort,** a short ride from the city center, is one of the finest high-end resorts in Indochina, and there are also some excellent-value hotels in town (some use this as a base to explore nearby Hoi An).

China Beach, or **My Khe** as it's known locally, is worth a stop. This former U.S. recreation base has a light-sand coast with excellent views of the nearby Marble Mountains and is just beginning to draw international visitors.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE You can fly to Danang from both Hanoi and HCMC. A taxi from the airport costs about $3 (£2).

BY BUS If you're traveling on the open-tour ticket, Danang is not a specified stop, but you can be dropped off at the Cham Museum. You'll have to call the office in either Hue or Hoi An for pickup when you're ready to leave. Travelers to Laos should contact **Vietnamtourism** for buses to Savannakhet ($25/£17).

BY CAR Danang is about 3½ hours by car from Hue. You'll pay $40 (£27) for the trip. From Hoi An, it's about an hour and costs $25 (£17). This ride makes a good day trip along with the Marble Mountains (see "What to See & Do," below). Contact **Vietnamtourism** for good rentals.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Vietnamtourism Danang (83 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai; ✆ **0511/382-3660;** fax 0511/821-560) can arrange trips to the Marble Mountains and My Son. **Exotissimo Travel Danang** (206 Nguyen Tri Phuong; ✆ **0511/364-7755;** fax 0511/364-7744; www.exotissimo.com) can make any arrangements. **An Phu Tourist** (147 Le Loi St.; ✆ **0511/381-8366;** anphutourist@hotmail.com) is the local tourist-cafe contact and can arrange any low-budget connections (it also has offices in Hoi An).

Fast Facts Danang

Currency Exchange The **Vietcombank** branch is at 140 Le Loi St. (✆ **0511/382-1955**).

Internet Access Like many Vietnamese cities, Danang is experiencing a boom in Internet cafes. Look for one near the Torino Jazz Club on Nguyen Chi Thanh Street.

Telephones The city code for Danang is **511.**

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive

Furama Resort Danang ★★ Just a short ride southwest of Danang and situated in elegant relation to a beautiful sandy beach, the Furama greets you in style with a grand lobby that is more or less the gilded frame to the beautiful scenery: sand, sun, and sky. Whether you're a sailor, a beach bum, or a comfort junkie, you'll find what you want.

There are two gorgeous swimming pools: one a multitiered minimalist still life overlooking the open beach, and the other a faux lagoon, complete with small waterfall and bridge. It's a good place to just relax, but there is always something to do, too: The hotel offers local tours, yoga, tai chi, a spa, and a full salon. Rooms are large and comfortable with wood floors, Vietnamese-style furniture, and sliding doors to balconies that overlook the ocean or pool. Large marble bathrooms have all the amenities. Prices are determined by view; oceanfront units are only steps from the beach and well worth it. Note that watersports are available only February through September—the surf is far too rough the rest of the year. Resort amenities are extensive, but they have to be, as the site is quite isolated. There are shuttles to the city, but there isn't much to entice in bustling Danang.

68 Ho Xuan Huong St. (ocean side 11km/7 miles southwest of town), Danang. ✆ **0511/384-7333.** Fax 0511/847-220. www.furamavietnam.com. 200 units. $220 (£147) garden view; $280–$300 (£187–£200) ocean view; $700 (£467) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 outdoor pools; 4 tennis courts; luxe health club; massage center; sauna; diving; sailboat (Laser) and kayak rental; concierge; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; salon; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Bamboo Green Hotel ★★ The best choice in Danang proper, Bamboo Green is operated by Vietnamtourism and is the best of its three properties in town (Bamboo Green II and III are comparable but less luxe). Rooms are large, with beige carpets and light-wood furnishings (try to overlook the hideous poly bedspreads). The nice-size marble bathrooms look brand-new. Ask for a room on the top floor for a city view. Hotel features include a big restaurant with decent Asian/Vietnamese fare, good tour services, and a friendly staff. Overall, this is as cozy as any midrange U.S. chain.

158 Phan Chau Trinh St., Danang. ✆ **0511/382-2996** or 0511/382-2997. Fax 0511/382-2998. 42 units. $50 (£33) superior; $70 (£47) deluxe; $100 (£67) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; sauna; tour desk; motorbike/car rental; limited room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Saigon Tourane Hotel ★ Popular with European tour groups, this nondescript, friendly, three-star standard hotel offers comfort at low cost. The rooms are carpeted and clean, and they come with tidy, good-size bathrooms; some upper-floor units have city views. Nonetheless, it's all a bit low-luxe, with a general atmosphere marked by failing neon signs and worn carpets that speak of the volumes that pass through. The hotel is owned by Saigontourist; thus guests are well connected and can make any necessary arrangements with little hassle. The staff couldn't be more kind. Be sure to ask for a room away from the karaoke—far away.

5 Dong Da St. (on the north end of town), Danang. ✆ **0511/382-1021.** Fax 0511/895-285. 82 units. $40–$45 (£27–£30) double; $80 (£53) suite. No credit cards. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; basic gym; sauna; Saigontourist tour desk; car rental; business center; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; karaoke. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

If you're at the **Furama Resort,** that's where you'll find the best fine dining, but beachside seafood shacks adjacent to the property also serve good barbecue for a fraction of resort prices. In Danang proper, choices are few, but they do exist. **Kim Do Restaurant** (180 Tran Phu St.; ✆ **0511/382-1846**), a popular Chinese restaurant of long standing, serves good stir-fries and steamed Cantonese specials. A notable find are the small storefronts

adjacent to the Cham Museum that serve good duck and rice dishes. A block up the river from the Cham Museum and 2 blocks in, the **Torino Jazz Club** (283 Nguyen Chi Thanh St.; ✆ **0511/356-5124**) is a welcome oasis in central Vietnam, serving perfect pasta, homemade tiramisu, and Chilean wine, all priced very reasonably. Near the Jazz Club, the **Apsara** offers superb Vietnamese dining and a show.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Cham Museum ★★ The Cham Museum was established in 1936 (originally the Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient) to house the relics of the powerful Hindu culture that once ruled vast tracts of central Vietnam. The museum has the largest collection of Cham sculpture in the world, in works ranging from the 4th to 14th centuries, presented in a rough outdoor setting that suits the evocative, sensual sculptures well. The more than 300 pieces of sandstone artwork and temple decorations were largely influenced by Hinduism and, later, Mahayana Buddhism. Among the cast of characters, you'll see symbols of Uroja, or "goddess mother," usually breasts or nipples; the linga, the phallic structure representing the god Shiva; the holy bird Garuda; and Ganesha, child of the god Shiva, with the head of an elephant. Note the masterpiece Tra Kieu altar of the late 7th century, with carved scenes telling the story of the epic *Ramayana.* There is also a permanent photo exhibit of the many Cham relics at various locations throughout Vietnam.

At Tran Phu and Le Dinh Duong sts. Admission 20,000VND ($1.10/75p). Daily 7am–6pm.

Marble Mountains ★ The "mountains" are actually a series of five marble and limestone formations, which the locals liken to the shape of a dragon at rest. The hills are interlaced with caves, some of which are important Buddhist sanctuaries. These caves, like so many in the country, served as shelter for the Viet Cong during the American war. The highest mountain, Thuy Son, is climbable via a series of metal ladders beginning inside the cave and extending to the surface at the top. Ling Ong Pagoda, a shrine within a cave, is a highlight. The quarries in Non Nuoc village, at the bottom of the mountains, are as interesting as the caves. Fantastic animals and fanciful statues of folk tales and Buddhist figures are carved from the rock. Try to get a good look before you're set upon by flocks of hawkers. What's more, even if you're interested in the items they hawk—incredibly cheap mortar-and-pestle sets, some very nice chess sets, turtles, and small animals—any amount of marble adds considerable weight to luggage. You can easily see the mountains as part of your trip en route to or from Hoi An; most cafe-tour buses stop here.

11km (7 miles) south of Danang and 9.5km (6 miles) north of Hoi An along Hwy. 1. All tours stop here. Admission 30,000VND ($1.70/£1.10).

9 HOI AN

A visit to this old-world gem, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, is a sure cultural highlight of any Vietnam tour. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Hoi An was Vietnam's most important port and trading post, particularly of ceramics with nearby China. Today, it is a quaint, picturesque town of some 844 structures protected as historic landmarks, and the unique influence of Chinese and Japanese traders who passed through (or settled) can still be felt.

Hoi An is small enough to cover easily on foot, with many nooks and crannies, shops, and gastronomic delights to discover. Wander among historic homes and temples, lounge

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Glory Hotel **7**
Hai Yen (Sea Swallow) Hotel **7**
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Life Heritage Resort Hoi An **8**
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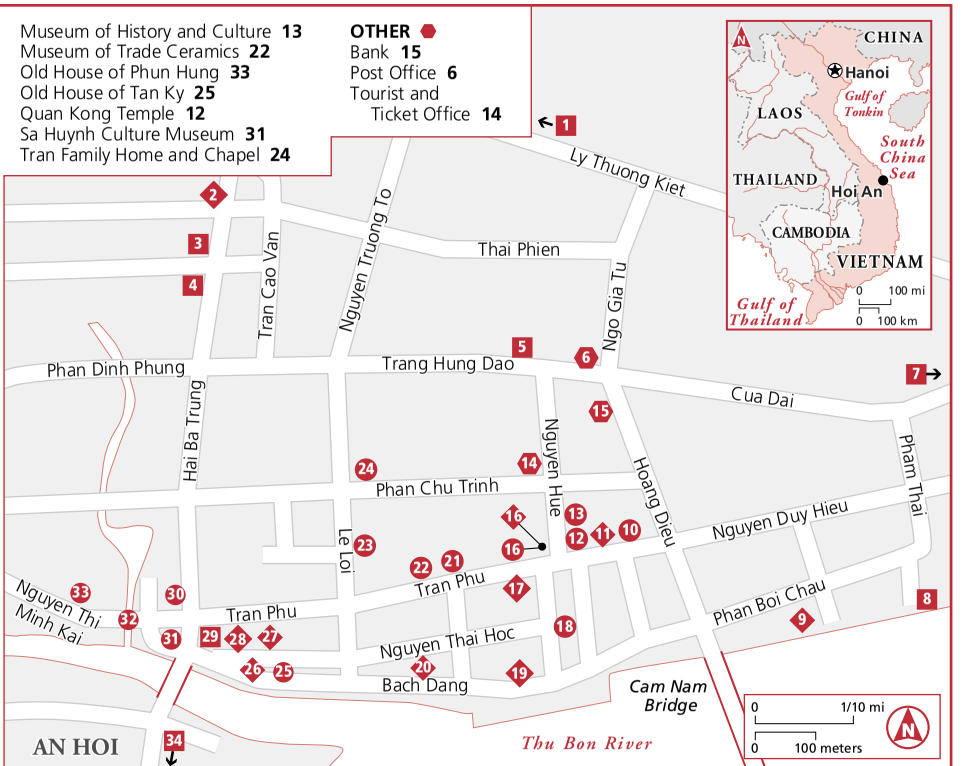

in an open-air cafe, gaze at the exotic foods in the market, or take a sampan ride down the lazy river. You can still see local craftspeople at work in some parts of the city. In the afternoons when school is out, the streets are thronged with skipping children, the girls in their *ao dai* uniforms.

On the full moon of every month, local shop owners turn off the electricity and hang lanterns bearing their shop's name; a candlelight lantern procession, complete with a few small floats, makes its way through the old town and along the riverfront. It's worth timing a visit to enjoy the spectacle and the postprocessional festivities.

GETTING THERE

By Plane/Train Major transport connections go through Danang. From there, you can take a car to Hoi An for between $8 and $25 (£5.30–£17).

BY BUS Hoi An is a major stop on all open-tour cafe buses. Connection with Danang is just $3 (£2).

GETTING AROUND

Hoi An is so small that you'll be able to memorize the map in an hour or two. Most hotels and guesthouses rent **bicycles** for 5,000VND to 7,000VND (30¢–40¢/20p–25p) a day, a great way to explore the outer regions of the city or Cua Dai Beach. **Motorbikes** are $3 to $5 (£12–£3.30) per day and are not difficult to drive in this tiny, calm city. **Cyclos** are here and there; 10,000VND (55¢/35p) or so should get you anywhere within the city. Car hire is also available anywhere; try **Faifoo Travel** (✆ **0510/3914-580**) for rentals by the hour or for a full day.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

- **Hoi An Tourist Guiding Office** (1 Nguyen Truong To, ✆ **0510/3861-327;** or 12 Phan Chu Trinh St., ✆ **0510/3862-715**) sells the Hoi An World Cultural Heritage tickets. A one-ticket purchase offers limited admission to the town's museums, old houses, and Chinese assembly halls. For more information about the tickets, see "What to See & Do," later in this chapter.
- **Hoi An Tourist Service Company,** inside the Hoi An Hotel (6 Tran Hung Dao St.; ✆ **0510/3861-373;** fax 0510/3861-636), is a reliable operation that books every type of tour of the city and surrounding areas, including China Beach and the Marble Mountains.
- **Sinh Café IV** (18B Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **0510/3863-948**) provides bus tours and tickets onward.
- **An Phu Tourist** (722 Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **0510/3862-643;** anphutourist@hotmail.com) does everything that Sinh Café does.

Fast Facts Hoi An

Currency Exchange The **Vietcombank** (4 Huong Dieu St.) has an ATM, changes most major currencies, and does credit card cash advances. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 7:30am to 7pm. **Incombank** exchanges money at its 9 Le Loio St. and 4 Hoang Diet St. branches. **Exchange Bureau #1,** across from the Hoi An Hotel at 37 Tran Hung Dao, has exchange services and an ATM. There is also an ATM at the post office.

Internet Access Along Le Loi, you'll find service at around 4,000VND (20¢/15p) per hour. Access is generally slow dial-up. On the northern end of town, **Min's Computer** (131 Nguyen Duy Hieu; ✆ **0510/3914-323**) is as good as it gets.

Mail The post office is at the corner of Trang Hong Dao and Huong Dieu streets; open Monday through Saturday from 6am to 9:30pm.

Telephones The city code for Hoi An is **510.** You can place international calls from the post office listed above and from most hotels. ***Note:*** The city has started increasing telephone numbers from six to seven digits. Not everyone is on the new system yet. If the number you call does not work, add "3" between the city code and the phone number, for example if "0510/123-456" is out of service, try "0510/312-3456."

WHERE TO STAY

Hoi An has seen a recent boom in upscale resorts, with more on the way along Cua Dai Beach. Large-scale new construction in Hoi An proper is prohibited by UNESCO, but smaller hotels are going upmarket, and there are a few new options closer to town.

Very Expensive

The Nam Hai ★★★ This is the best luxury resort in Vietnam. From the outdoor reception desk you can sneak a peek at the three infinity swimming pools that line the central axis and disappear into the ocean horizon. Staff is incredibly friendly and quick to be of service at the first sign of a furrowed brow.

The one-bedroom villa is a chic affair of granite stone floors, local dark wood, and brown, cream, and green colors. The centerpiece is a raised six-column platform topped with lattice woodwork and draped in silk curtains. Behind it are the bed and a bathtub done in traditional crushed eggshell lacquer. The outdoor tropical rain shower is an excellent place to rinse off sand and sea salt. The size and layout make the resort a very discreet place; after walking around for most of the day and even going for a swim in the main pool, I only encountered a handful of people until dinner time. When night falls, the resort and villa lighting is very dim—if you've had a few glasses of wine at dinner and are coming home in high heels, tread carefully. Do your makeup before the sun goes down.

Hamlet 1, Dien Duong village, Dien Ban District, Quang Nam Province. ✆ **0510/3940-000.** Fax 0510/3940-999. www.ghmhotels.com. 100 units. $750–$850 (£500–£567) 1-bedroom villas; $1,200–$3,400 (£800–£2,267) 1- to 5-bedroom pool villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 3 outdoor pools; 4 tennis courts; health club; basketball court; badminton court; spa; bikes; business center and library; room service; laundry service; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, on-demand movies and satellite TV, Wi-Fi, iPod/MP3 docking station, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Hoi An Beach Resort ★ Opened in 2000, this is the flagship of Hoi An Tourist, a government-owned company, and it's their answer to recent upscale development in town. The resort is across the road from Cua Dai Beach and close to the small "restaurant row" and popular tourist sunbathing area. Everything here—from the casual open-air restaurant to the more expensive rooms and suites—faces the De Vong River as it approaches the sea, offering a unique glimpse of everyday riverside life. At the bar and upscale access point to the beach, you can sit in private chairs without harassment from beachside sellers. All rooms here are nice, but the villas are certainly worth the few extra

dollars: They're quite large, with high ceilings and private balconies. Villas and suites have vaulted ceilings, and some have separate entrances with a shower area for cleanup after the beach. Service and general standards are comparable to the high-end competition in town. It's a popular choice for large European tours and can get a bit wild in the busy season, but it's all good fun. There are frequent shuttles to town.

1 Cua Dai, Cua Dai Beach, Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3927-011** or 0510/3927-015. Fax 0510/3927-019. www.hoiantourist.com. 110 units. $110 (£73) garden deluxe double; $150 (£100) river- or oceanview villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; 2 large outdoor pools; small health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam bath; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; shops; salon; limited room service; foot massage; babysitting; laundry service; Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Hoi An Riverside Resort & Spa ★★ For tranquil and intimate surroundings, you'll find no better place than this lush little resort between road and river outside of Hoi An. The place has a cozy feel, as if guest rooms kind of grew around the winding path of the garden and courtyard pool. Rooms are neat and clean, not especially big, but with nice views of the meandering bend in the river or the quiet garden. Vietnamese- or Japanese-themed accommodations have small, spotless bathrooms and nice wood appointments throughout. The staff is invisible, meaning that this place carries on like an immaculately trimmed golf course that gets a once-over each night. The Song Do restaurant serves fine Vietnamese and Continental fare; a visit to the Faifo bar harks back to another era. The central pool is a relaxing spot—great after wandering the town labyrinths. The staff is very professional and informative. The resort offers Vietnamese cooking lessons and lazy canoe trips on the picturesque river.

175 Cua Dai Rd. (3km/1¾ miles from town), Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3864-800.** Fax 0510/3864-900. www.hoianriverresort.com. 60 units. $139 (£93) Vietnamese standard; $149 (£99) Japanese standard; $159 (£106) superior (river view); $210 (£140) deluxe (river view). Internet rates available. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; health club; badminton court; business center w/Internet access; nice souvenir shop; salon; room service; foot massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; small library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Life Heritage Resort Hoi An ★ Life Resort is the only resort within walking distance of Hoi An—a good start. It shut down in 2008 for renovations, and the resulting look is fabulous. The new dark-wood furniture and warm accent colors such as orange and dark champagne are a welcome addition to the formerly spartan decorations. Rooms are split-level, with the slightly raised sleeping area done in cool slate tiles. Bathrooms are large, open-plan affairs. Views of the river are good, and deluxe units have quiet sitting areas out front that are perfect for meditation or a respite from the noonday sun. The dining outlets, housed in a faux-colonial block at riverside, are atmospheric; the quiet, air-conditioned cafe has good coffee and desserts. For location alone, this is a great choice.

1 Pham Hong Thai St., Hoi An. ✆ **510/3391-4555.** Fax 510/3391-4515. www.life-resorts.com. 94 units. $159 (£106) garden view; $178–$213 (£119–£142) junior suite, depending on view; $303–$333 (£202–£222) grand suite, depending on view. Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe.

Victoria Hoi An Beach Resort & Spa ★★ It's peace and palm trees just a short ride from ancient Hoi An. The comfortable Victoria, with top-notch amenities and lots of activities, begs at least a few nights' stay. Guest rooms have it right in every detail, from fine rustic decor to in-room sandals and beach robes. Rooms are either the bungalow variety in low-slung buildings at beachside or set in parallel two-story rows to mimic Hoi

An's ancient streets—not displeasing, but a bit like a theme park. Prices reflect beachside proximity, but even the least expensive units are laid-back and classy. Some bungalows are decorated in French country style, with canopy beds and wicker; others are unique Japanese rooms, with open-timber construction, bamboo floors, and large tubs. There is a certain flow to this property, from beach to garden, rooms to common spaces, which invites guests to wander; everything's connected by catwalk. Convenient shuttles connect to town frequently; or you can rent a motor cycle with sidecar. Other perks include a private boat for transfer to town, kite-surfing equipment, and cooking courses. Victoria Hoi An is the only hotel in the area offering full-body massages.

Cua Dai Beach (5km/3 miles from town), Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3927-040.** Fax 0510/3927-041. www.victoriahotels-asia.com. 105 units. $190–$245 (£127–£163) double depending on view; $325 (£217) suite. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; large outdoor beachside pool; 2 tennis courts; nice health club; spa; Jacuzzi; kayak/Windsurfer/Hobie Cat rental; children's play area; tour desk; car rental; shopping; extensive salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; small library; snooker/billiards room; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Moderate

Cua Dai Hotel ★★ A budget gem on the beach road just out of town (like nearby Hai Yen, below), the Cua Dai is a good marriage of affordability and comfort. It's easy to settle in here, with the open sitting areas furnished in wicker and the basic but comfy rooms. The very kind staff will make you feel right at home, too, and can help with any travel need. The only drawback is the busy road out front, but all units have double-paned windows and are relatively quiet. Rooms in the new wing in back have fine wooden appointments and creative, local decor; older rooms in the main building are quite large, basic, and comfortable. Cua Dai makes a good base to explore or meet the many expats and long-stay travelers here on cultural or humanitarian missions.

18A Cua Dai St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3862-231** or 0510/3864-604. Fax 0510/3862-232. 24 units. $35–$50 (£23–£33) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; bicycle/motorbike available; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge.

Glory Hotel On Cua Dau Street just east of town (heading toward the beach), this newer hotel has a fine standard of rooms, all very large if rather spartan, set in a four-story block around a central pool area. The price is right, everything is clean, and the hotel covers all the bases. The pool is but a postage stamp, but the courtyard is tranquil.

538 Cua Dai St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3914-444.** Fax 0510/3914-445. www.gloryhotelhoian.com. 65 units. $51–$68 (£34–£45) double; $80 (£53) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Hai Yen (Sea Swallow) Hotel ★ This is a good, basic hotel on the edge of the old town (a short walk or ride to the beach); it's a popular choice for large budget-tour groups. Slick tile throughout gives everything a tidy edge. Spacious rooms have funky Chinese relief carvings, overly fancy curtains, and shiny polyester spreads—an A for effort, but the general effect is kind of unsettling. The nice (if small) pool is a surprise luxury in this price range. It's all a bit rough around the edges here, with a kind of faded pallor over the whole place. The staff is friendly, though, and can help with any detail.

22A Cua Dai St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3862-445** or 0510/3862-446. Fax 0510/3862-443. 41 units. $20–$40 (£13–£27) double (seasonal). AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; all rentals available; tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Hoi An Hotel ★★ Still the best and most conv enient in-town address, the H oi An Hotel was the first high-end hotel and wor ks hard to keep that r eputation. As a r esult, it's pretty busy here, with lots of tour groups. The friendly staff does a great job, though, and handles large numbers with a modicum of grace. D on't expect anything fancy, but rooms are unusually large and impeccably clean, with tile floors and comfor table beds. The newest building has upscale rooms with dark-wood floors and a fun, contemporary Chinese theme (but the older r ooms are just as good). The central pool is large, though often overcrowded. The folks at the tour desk ar e very helpful.

10 Tran Hung Dao St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3386-1373.** Fax 0510/3386-1636. w ww.hoiantourist.com. 150 units. $70–$115 (£47–£77) double; $180 (£120) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; garden bar; nice courtyard pool; t ennis c ourt; Jacuzzi; c oncierge; t our desk ; car r ental; business c enter; r oom ser vice; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Vinh Hung Resor t ★ Chinese-style entr epreneurs follow the " start small; go big " model, and that's what the folks at Vinh Hung have done. Their small in-town properties (Vinh Hung I and II, belo w) are popular, so they've turned that income back into this latest pr oject: a self-contained, midlev el r esort on H oi An I sland. The ar ea, slated for further dev elopment in coming y ears, is just a 10- to 15-minute walk fr om the canal bridge at H oi An's center. D eluxe r ooms ar e the best bet—large and tidy , with wood floors, Chinese tapestries, and carpeted sitting ar eas. H igh-end r ooms ar e enormous, some with Jacuzzis. Ask for one overlooking the wide river. Although services are limited, and ev erything is a bit compact, Vinh H ung R esort is an affor dable and conv enient getaway. Rental kayaks make for a unique commute to the town center, or you can catch a ferry to town if you prefer.

111 Ngo Quyen, on Hoi An Island (across the small bridge connecting to town near Bach Dang St. and a short ride to the opposite end of the island), Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3910-577.** Fax 0510/3864-094. www.vinh hunghotels.com.vn. 82 units. $70–$100 (£47–£67) double (depending on view); $125 (£83) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; 2 outdoor pools; tennis court; small fitness center; Jacuzzi; sauna; kayak rental (guests can paddle to town); tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; salon; limited room service; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe.

Inexpensive

Thanh Bin II Hotel ★ The Thanh Bin II is ne wer and nicer than its sister pr operty, the **Thanh Bin I** (✆ **0510/3861-740**), which has a good location on Le Loi S treet but just basic r ooms. This thr ee-story building has a Chinese-inspir ed lobb y, with car ved dark-wood furnishings and cafe tables. Upstairs are the very clean, spacious guest rooms. The decor is a color-coor dinated mishmash, but ther e's not a musty smell to be found, the bathrooms are tidy, and the staff is r eally friendly. For fun, ask about a suite: a huge room that spor ts wood paneling, car ved Chinese-style furnishings, a mosquito net o ver the bed, a nice balcony with beaded cur tains, and, in the center of ev erything, a large wooden carving of a fat, happy Buddha. Another location, **Thanh Bin III,** is also on Hai Ba Trung Street (✆ **0510/3916-777**).

712 Hai Ba Trung St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3863-715.** vothihong@dng.vnn.vn. 31 units. $15–$20 (£10–£13) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; rentals; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge.

Vinh Hung I and II ★ Standard rooms in both Vinh Hung I and II ar e large, with wooden appointments and cool r etro featur es such as mosquito nets and Chinese lat-ticework balconies. Vinh Hung I, a do wntown property set in an old wooden Chinese house, is a Hoi An institution; its two signature rooms are almost museum pieces and are alone wor th a visit, but they 're not especially lux e or comfor table. Vinh H ung II is a

tour-group favorite and often full—and for good reason (the central pool is unique in this category). Popularity means heavy use, though, and the place is getting a bit rough around the edges. The new Vinh Hung Resort (see above) is an improvement on an old theme.

Vinh Hung 1: 143 Tran Phu St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3861-621.** Fax 0510/3874-094. 6 units. $60–$90 (£40–£60) double. Vinh Hung II: Hai Ba Trung St., Hoi An. ✆ **0510/3863-717.** Fax 0510/3864-094. $30–$40 (£20–£27) double. 31 units. www.vinhhunghotels.com. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small outdoor pool; rentals; tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV.

WHERE TO DINE

Hoi An is a feast for the stomach as well as for the eyes. Local specialties include *cao lau* (rice noodles with fresh greens, rice crackers, and croutons), white rose dumplings of shrimp in clear rice dough, and savory fried wontons. Good, fresh seafood is available everywhere (don't miss the morning market). There are some new high-end options in town alongside the popular standbys, and each of the resorts has its own fine dining (see "Where to Stay," above).

The riverfront road, **Bach Dang,** has become the de facto "restaurant row," where you're sure to be besieged by friendly but persistent touts who will literally try to drag you into their restaurants. Since many places here are comparable in price and cuisine (fried rice and noodles), it's sometimes fun to let the restaurant choose you. ***Note:*** If you do eat on Bach Dang but you'd like a quieter meal, choose a table a bit off the street and say a calm "No, thank you" to the many young Tiger Balm and chewing-gum salesmen.

Expensive

Brother's Café ★★★ VIETNAMESE Serving fine Vietnamese fare like its sister restaurant in Hanoi (but here it's a la carte, not buffet), Brother's Café is the town's top choice for both cuisine and atmosphere. A bland street-side facade gives way to the lush garden sanctuary formed by this grand U-shaped colonial by the river. Indoor seating is upscale Indochina of a bygone era, while the courtyard is dotted with canvas umbrellas to shade you on a balmy afternoon. The food is gourmet Vietnamese at its finest, with changing daily set menus and great specials; be sure to ask for a recommendation. It's a good place to try local items such as White Rose (a light Vietnamese ravioli) or *cao lao* noodles. Groups can order family style. Ask the friendly staff about the cooking school here.

27–31 Pham Boi Chau St. ✆ **0510/3914-150.** Main courses $8–$20 (£5.30–£13). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Hoi An Cargo Club & Patisserie ★ INTERNATIONAL Ms. Vy has expanded her Hoi An empire—which includes the Mermaid and White Lantern restaurants (p. 332) and the Cua Dai Hotel (p. 328)—with this unique, open-air patisserie and French cafe. The stylish storefront serves light meals in a casual lounge on the first floor; upstairs is a refined restaurant specializing in contemporary Vietnamese cuisine. Sandwiches are made from fresh bread baked on-site. Seafood dishes abound, such as the crab in five spices or jumbo shrimp with tamarind sauce. Curries and good veggie dishes round out a good, affordable menu. If you dine upstairs, you can sit on the cool balcony overlooking the river.

107–109 Nguyen Thai Hoc St. ✆ **0510/3910-489.** www.hoianhospitality.com. Main courses 42,000VND–195,000VND ($2.35–$11/£1.60–£7.35). MC, V. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

Song Hoai, The Saigon Times Club ★★ VIETNAMESE Set in the most picturesque period building in town, on a corner overlooking riverside Bach Dang, this Saigon-managed restaurant is as much about atmosphere as it is about food. Rivaled only by

Brother's (see above), the two open floors here exemplify true old Hoi An elegance. The second floor has views of the river and dramatic touches, such as a high ceiling and languid ceiling fans. Song Hoai serves regional dishes including Hanoi *cha ca* and *mi quang* wide noodles; try the Vietnamese-style ravioli, the local White Rose specialty, and the fresh pan-fried shrimp. Presentation is arguably the classiest in town, with fine china, stemware, and lacquered dishes on linen, and the service is professional if a bit hovering. A good choice for a romantic evening, Hoi An style.

119–121 Nguyen Thai Hoc St. ✆ **0510/3910-369.** Fax 0510/3910-436. Main courses 40,000VND–250,000VND ($2.25–$14/£1.55–£9.40). AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–10:30pm.

Tam-Tam Café ★★ ITALIAN/CONTINENTAL/VIETNAMESE Tam-Tam is the place to be in Hoi An. The brainchild of three French expats, it is historic and laid-back, serving good, familiar food. The decor is authentic local style, with hanging bamboo lamps, a high ceiling, and fantastic wooden figurines. The dinner menu, served in a separate room with checkered tablecloths, is simple—generous portions of homemade pastas, steaks, and salads—but the food is delicious. Desserts include flambéed crepes, sorbet, and hot chocolate. There are two barrooms: The bigger one to the left of the entry has a pool table, a book-swap shelf, and comfortable lounge chairs and sofas—it's the place to hang out in Hoi An. The extensive drinks menu features all kinds of bang-for-the-buck rum specials. There's even a small counter on the balcony where you can sip a cocktail and watch life go by on the street below. Even if it's just for a coffee, don't miss this place.

110 Nguyen Thai Hoc St., 2nd floor. ✆ **0510/3862-212.** Main courses 35,000VND–170,000VND ($1.95–$9.60/£1.30–£6.40). AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Moderate

Café des Amis ★★ VIETNAMESE What's on the menu? There isn't one. It's your choice of set menu, either seafood or vegetarian, and the details are, well, a surprise. And the surprise is always good—one of the best meals in Vietnam (just read the straight dope from the many people who sign the lengthy guest book). You might enjoy a leisurely dinner of savory clear soup, fried wontons with shrimp, broiled fish, stuffed calamari, and scallops on the half shell. Sit back and surrender yourself to the surprises of the effusive Mr. Kim and his attentive staff. Mr. Kim is a practiced raconteur with rich material from his years as a taster for the army and a chef for heads of state. He is careful to explain the intricacies of each dish and even demonstrates how to eat some of the more unique entrees. A meal here makes for a memorable evening.

52 Bach Dang St. ✆ **0510/3861-616.** Set menu 120,000VND–150,000VND ($6.75–$8.50/£4.50–£5.65). No credit cards. Daily 6am–10pm.

Cafeteria 22 (Miss Ly's) ★ You're greeted by the kind proprietor herself, always dressed to the nines and welcoming. The menu is limited, but that means everything is always fresh in this hole-in-the-wall cafe in the heart of the old town. It's the best place in Hoi An to try the town's famous fried wontons, a rice pastry stuffed with meat, shrimp, and onion and topped with Miss Ly's special sauce, onion, and tomato—messy and delicious. Since Ly has been at it for more than 10 years now, she has just the right formula. There's nothing fancy here, and that's just the appeal for folks who tire easily of trumped-up atmosphere and overpriced versions of local fare. Come meet Ly and try the real deal.

22 Nguyen Hue St. ✆ **0510/3861-603.** Main courses 25,000VND–90,000VND ($1.40–$5.10/95p–£3.40). No credit cards. Daily 8am–11pm.

Hoi An Hai San ★★ VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL *Hai-san* means "seafood" in Vietnamese and "hello" in Swedish. The owners, Swedish expat Calle and his Vietnamese wife, Hoa, offer just that: "Hello, seafood!" This is one of the few spots on Bach Dang that won't try to drag you in—instead, it's the food that brings folks here. Everything's good: grilled tuna with ginger, garlic, and lemon grass, served in a light coconut milk; sea scallops in cream sauce, a fav orite; and Swedish lingonberry ice cream. It's a good place to linger and watch the goings-on on busy Bach Dang.

64 Bach Dang St. ✆ **0510/3861-652.** Main courses 30,000VND–225,000VND ($1.70–$13/£1.10–£8.50). No credit cards. Daily 10am–10pm.

Mermaid (Nhu Y) Restaurant ★★ VIETNAMESE This quiet spot in the heart of downtown is an unassuming, ivy-draped storefront that serves some of the best authentic Vietnamese food in town (for next to nothing). The tuna filet, cooked in a banana leaf with turmeric, is scrumptious; the spring rolls are light and fresh, with a whole jumbo shrimp in each; and the Mermaid serves a most unique dish called white eggplant: It's eggplant covered in spring onion, garlic, and chile, and then pressed, sliced, and served in a light oil. If you like what you eat, stick around and take a **cooking class**—a chance to bring some of Vietnam home to your kitchen.

02 Tran Phu St. ✆ **0510/3861-527.** www.hoianhospitality.com. Main courses 90,000VND–150,000VND ($5.10–$8.45/£3.40–£5.65). No credit cards. Daily 10am–10pm.

Morning Glory ★★★ VIETNAMESE Ms. Vy's (owner of Mermaid, above, and White Lantern, below) newest restaurant is the talk of the town, and for good reason. Set in a French-style colonial building in the heart of Hoi An's old district, this low-key eatery serves Vietnamese street food with a twist: It's as healthy and fresh as it is authentic. The menu includes tips from Ms. Vy on the health properties of ingredients, and recommendations (for example, for cooling the body in hot weather, try the traditional dessert Che, made with soft tofu and ginger syrup). We highly recommend the grilled pork with fresh rice paper, the *banh xeo* (crepe-style pancakes stuffed with shrimp, bean sprouts, and other veggies), the "caramel" mackerel in a clay pot, and the whole grilled trout—grilled and smothered in lemon grass, chile peppers, lime, and peanuts, it is perfection. It's not the cheapest meal in town, but not a megasplurge either.

106 Nguyen Thai Hoc St. ✆ **0510/3241-555.** www.hoianhospitality.com. Main courses 45,000VND–195,000VND ($2.55–$11/£1.70–£7.35). MC, V. Daily 9am–10pm.

White Lantern ★★ VIETNAMESE This is a very popular tour-group stop, so get here early (or late); if you see buses parked out front, head for the hills. Everyone's here for good reason, though: delicious, affordable Vietnamese cuisine and a mellow atmosphere. Strumming guitarists roam the tables playing Beatles tunes and local numbers; both the large open area on the first floor and the balcony space upstairs are dimly lit and romantic. Set menus are a great bet and can include a fine meal of delicate wonton soup, spring rolls, and chicken in a light curry. Owned by the same folks that run the Mermaid, above, this is a slightly upscale version.

710 Hai Ba Trung St., just north of the town center. ✆ **0510/3241-556.** www.hoianhospitality.com. Main courses 45,000VND–195,000VND ($2.55–$11/£1.75–£7.35); set menus 90,000VND–100,000VND ($5.10–$5.65/£3.50–£3.75). MC, V. Daily 9am–10pm.

Inexpensive

Wan Lu ★ It's an open-air place, and the atmosphere is a little rough, but it serves a nice selection of local favorites, all for next to nothing. Try the special, *cao lao*, a thick

but tender white noodle in light soy with fresh vegetables, garnishes, and croutons. This is where the locals eat it—but if it's not your cup of tea, then you're out only 6,000VND (about 35¢/20p). The portions are big and everything's authentic, right down to the kindness in this little mom-and-pop joint. There are no touts here; it's the food that brings 'em in.

27 Tran Phu St. ✆ **0510/3861-212.** Main courses 70,000VND–90,000VND ($3.95–$5.10/£2.60–£3.40). No credit cards. Daily 7am–9pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The whole town is an attraction, its narrow streets buzzing with open-air crafts shops, woodworkers, and carvers based in lovely historic buildings. Most Hoi An buildings have been lovingly restored and transformed into cafes, art galleries, and silk and souvenir shops, while retaining their dignity. If you're an artist, bring your sketch pad and watercolors; photographers, bring plenty of film. Tran Phu and Nguyen Thai Hoc streets are crowded with the shops of the original Chinese merchants and clan associations.

World Cultural Heritage Sights

The **Hoi An World Cultural Heritage Organization** (www.hoianworldheritage.org) has the dilemma of financing restorations and maintaining the old portions of the town. It sells a 75,000VND ($4.20/£2.90) ticket that allows limited admission to the sights within the old town, each of which is listed below. "Limited" means a "one from column A, one from column B" formula. That is, one ticket gets you one of the three museums, one of the two assembly halls, one of the four old houses, plus a choice of the Japanese Covered Bridge, the Quan Cong Temple, or the local handicrafts workshop; finally, a "wild card" lets you see one additional place in any category. So, in order to see everything, you'd have to purchase three tickets. See "Visitor Information & Tours," earlier, for where to buy tickets.

Museums

Museum of History and Culture ★ This tottering building, erected in 1653, houses works that cover 2,000 years of Hoi An history, from Cham relics to ancient ceramics and photos of local architecture. The English-language explanations are scanty. If you're seeing only one museum, make it the Museum of Trade Ceramics (see below). One interesting tidbit: The name Hoi An literally means "water convergence" and "peace."

7 Nguyen Hue St. Daily 8am–5pm.

Museum of Trade Ceramics ★★★ Located in a traditional house, this museum describes the origins of Hoi An as a trade port and displays its most prominent trade items. Objects are from the 13th through 17th centuries and include Chinese and Thai works as well. While many of the exhibits are in fragments, the museum does have very thorough descriptions in English, giving you a real sense of the town's origins and history. Furthermore, the architecture and renovations of the house are thoroughly explained, and you're free to wander through its two floors, courtyard, and anteroom. After all the scattered explanations at the other historic houses, you'll finally get a sense of what Hoi An architecture is all about.

80 Tran Phu St. Daily 8am–5pm.

Sa Huynh Culture Museum ★ After local farmers around Hoi An dug up some strange-looking pottery, archaeologists identified 53 sites where a pre-Cham people, called the Sa Huynh, buried their dead in ceramic jars. The two-room display here

includes some of the burial jars, beaded ornaments, pottery vessels, and iron tools and weapons that have been uncovered. English descriptions are sketchy. Upstairs, the little-visited Museum of the Revolution includes such intriguing items as the umbrella "which Mr. Truong Munh Luong used for acting a fortune-teller to act revolution from 1965 to 1967." Huh? This is for connoisseurs only.

149 Tran Phu St. Daily 8am–6pm.

Old Houses

Old House of Phun Hung ★ This private house, constructed in 1780, comprises two floors of various architectural influences. The first floor's central roof is four-sided, showing Japanese influence, while the upstairs balcony has a Chinese rounded "turtle shell" roof with carved beam supports. The house has weathered many floods; in 1964, during a particularly bad bout, its third floor served as a refuge for other town families. The upstairs is outfitted with a trapdoor for moving furniture rapidly to safety. You might be shown around by Ms. Anh, who claims to be an eighth-generation member of the family. Although tour guides at every house make such claims, the family really does seem to live here.

4 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai St. Daily 8am–5pm.

Old House of Tan Ky ★ There have been either five or seven generations of Tans living here, depending on whom you speak with. Built more than 200 years ago, the four small rooms are crammed with dark-wood antiques. The room closest to the street was for greeting visiting merchants. Farther in are the living room, then the courtyard, and, to the back, the bedroom. The first three are open to the public. A guide, who will greet you at the door, will hasten to explain how the house is a perfect melding of three architectural styles: ornate Chinese detailing on some curved roof beams, a Japanese peaked roof, and a simple Vietnamese cross-hatch roof support. The mosaic decorations on the wall and furniture are aged, intricate, and amazing. Take your time and look around.

101 Nguyen Thai Hoc St. Daily 8am–5pm.

Tran Family Home and Chapel ★★★ In 1802, a civil service mandarin named Tran Tu Nhuc built a family home and chapel to worship his ancestors. A favorite of Viet Emperor Gia Long, he was sent to China as an ambassador, and his home reflects his high status. Elegantly designed with original Chinese antiques and royal gifts such as swords, two parts of the home are open to the public: a drawing room and the ancestral chapel. The house does a splendid job of conveying all that is interesting about these people and their period; it has even been featured in a fashion magazine. The drawing room has three sections of sliding doors: the left for men, the right for women, and the center, open only at Tet and other festivals, for dead ancestors to return home. The ancestral altar in the inner room has small boxes behind it containing relics and a biography of the deceased; their pictures hang, a little spookily, to the right of the altar. A 250-year-old book with the family history resides on a table to the right of the altar. In back of the house are a row of plants, each buried with the placenta and umbilical cord of a family child, so that the child will never forget its home. As if it could.

21 Le Loi St. (at corner of Phan Chu Trinh St.). Daily 8am–5pm.

Assembly Halls

Cantonese Assembly Hall (Quang Trieu/Guangzhou Assembly Hall) Built in 1885, this hall is quite ornate and colorful. All of the building materials were brought here from China and then reassembled. The center garden sports a fountain with a

dragon made of chipped pottery. Inside, look for the statues depicting scenes from famous Cantonese operas and, in the rooms to each side, the ancestral tablets of generations past.

176 Tran Phu St. Daily 8am–6pm.

Fukian Assembly Hall (Phuc Kien) This is the grandest of the assembly halls, built in 1697 by Chinese merchants from Fukian Province. It is a showpiece of classical Chinese architecture, at least after you pass the first gate, which was added in 1975. It's loaded with animal themes: The fish in the mosaic fountain symbolizes scholarly achievement, the unicorn flanking the ascending stairs symbolizes wisdom, the dragon symbolizes power, the turtle symbolizes longevity, and the phoenix symbolizes nobility. The main temple is dedicated to Thien Hau, goddess of the sea, on the main altar. To the left of her is Thuan Phong Nhi, a goddess who can hear ships within a range of thousands of miles; on the right is Thien Ly Nhan, who can see them. Go around the altar for a view of a fantastic detailed miniature boat. There are two altars to the rear of the temple, the one on the left honoring a god of prosperity and the one on the right honoring a goddess of fertility. The goddess of fertility is often visited by local couples hoping for children. She is flanked by 12 fairies or midwives, each responsible for one of a baby's functions: smiling, sleeping, eating, and so forth.

46 Tran Phu St. Daily 7am–6pm.

More World Cultural Heritage Sights

Japanese Covered Bridge ★★★ The name of this bridge in Vietnamese, Lai Vien Kieu, means "Pagoda in Japan." No one is quite sure who first built it in the early 1600s (it has since been renovated several times), but it is usually attributed to Hoi An's Japanese community. The dog flanking one end and the monkey at the other were considered sacred animals by the ancient Japanese. A guide claimed this was because most Japanese emperors were born in the Asian zodiac year of either the monkey or the dog, though we later read that perhaps the animals' presence means construction began in the year of the dog and was completed in the year of the monkey. The small temple inside is dedicated to Tran Vo Bac De, god of the north, beloved (or cursed) by sailors because he controls the weather.

At the west end of Tran Phu St.

Quan Kong Temple ★ This temple was built in the early 1600s to honor a famous Chin Dynasty general. Highlights inside are two gargantuan 3m (10-ft.) wooden statues flanking the main altar, one of Quan Kong's protector and one of his adopted son. They are both fearsome and impressive. The temple was reportedly a stop for merchants who came in from the nearby river to pay their respects and pray for the general's attributes of loyalty, bravery, and virtue.

168 Tran Phu St. (at corner of Nguyen Hue). Daily 8am–5pm.

Other Attractions

Central Market ★★ If you see only one Vietnamese market, make it this one. There are endless stalls of exotic foodstuffs and services, plus a special shed for silk tailoring at the east end (these tailors charge much less than the ones along Le Loi). Check out the ladies selling spices—curries, chile powders, cinnamon, peppercorns, and especially saffron. But don't buy from the first woman you see; the stuff gets cheaper the deeper you go into the market. Walk out to the docks to see activity there (best early in the morning),

but be careful of fish flying through the air, and stand back from the furious bargaining (best before 7am).

At Nguyen Hue and Tran Phu sts. along the Thu Bon River, on the southeast side of town.

Chinese Assembly Hall ★ This hall was built in 1740 as a meeting place for all of the resident Chinese, regardless of their native province.

64 Tran Phu St. Daily 8am–5pm.

Hainan Assembly Hall The Chinese merchants from Hainan Island, in the South China Sea east of Danang, built this hall. Although it is newer than most and is mainly made of concrete, it is still nice.

178 Nguyen Duy Hieu St. Daily 8am–5pm.

House of Hoi An Traditional Handicraft ★★ This is basically a silk shop with an interesting gimmick: On the first floor, you can see a 17th-century silk loom and a working, machine-powered cotton one. On the second floor, you can see where silk comes from: There are trays of silkworms feeding, then a rack of worms incubating, and then a tub of hot water where the pupae's downy covering is rinsed off and then pulled, strand by strand, onto a large skein. It's cool. The shop has the best selection of silks, both fine and raw, in many colors and weights good for clothing and for home interiors.

41 Le Loi St. Daily 8am–5pm.

SHOPPING

Southeast Asia is packed with would-be Buddhists, travelers on a real spiritual mission espousing lives of detachment from material desires. These folks usually walk away with just the "one suit, two shirts, trousers, and a tie package" when they leave Hoi An. Shopaholics wander the streets in a daze.

Hoi An is a silk mecca. The quality and selection are the best in the country, and you'll have more peace and quiet at fittings here than in Hanoi. **Silk suits** are made to order within 24 hours for about $35 (£23); **cashmere wool suits** are $45 (£30). There are countless shops, and the tailoring is all about the same quality and speed. A good way to choose a shop is by what you see out front—if you spot a style you like, it will help with the ordering. Make sure you take the time to specify your style, down to the stitch (it can come back looking pretty cheap without specifics). Try any of the shops along Le Loi; to recommend one in particular would be like choosing one snowflake over another. The tailoring is very fast, but not always great, so plan to have two or three fittings. Be choosy about your cloth, or go to the market and haggle over it yourself (try **Hoi An Cloth Market** at 1 Tran Phu St.). It's not a bad idea to bring an actual suit or piece of clothing that you'd like to have copied. ***Tip:*** Get measurements from friends and relatives for good gifts.

If you have a hard time choosing from among the many budget tailors, consider **Yaly Couture** (47 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3910-474**). It has higher prices, but its quality comes with more of a guarantee.

After shopping for your new suit, seek out one of the town's skilled cobblers, who make **custom shoes** at affordable rates. You'll find them near the market on Tran Phu Street.

Tran Phu Street is also lined with **art galleries** and vendors of good **pottery** and **carved wood.** Along the river, lots of places sell blue-and-white **ceramics.** Among the fine high-end galleries springing up in town, try **Lyly 2 Gallery** (83 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3863-184**). The nearby **Bambou Company** (96 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.)

produces unique (Western-size) T-shirts of local theme and design. Regardless of how cumbersome your finds are—like those lovely **Chinese lanterns**—shopkeepers are masters at packing goods for travel and to fit in your luggage, and will do so before you've even agreed on a price or decided to buy. Haggle hard.

HOI AN AFTER DARK

For the most part, Hoi An is a town that sleeps early, but there are a few good nightspots. **Tam-Tam Café** (p. 331) is a popular spot for travelers, expats, and locals. Another late-night tourist hangout, **Hai's Scout Café** (98 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3863-210**), features your standard bar drinks, cappuccino, and great baked treats. **Treat's Same Same Café** (158 Tran Phu St.; ✆ **0510/3861-125**) is usually hopping; it even has a pool table and a guillotine (for show, of course). Also try **Same Same Not Different Café,** on Phan Dinh Phung next to An Phu Tourist (both locations are, in short, similar).

The **Yellow Star Café** (73 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3910-430;** www.yellowstarcafe.com) serves drinks, while the next-door **ChamPa** (75 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3862-974**) has a cozy atmosphere, good wine, and frequent cultural dance performances. **Lounge Bar** (102 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3910-480**) is a chic, laid-back stop, while nearby **Mango Rooms** (111 Nguyen Thai Hoc St.; ✆ **0510/3910-839**) is similarly hip and mellow.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HOI AN

Cua Dai Beach ★★

Cua Dai Beach is a 25-minute bike ride from Hoi An on a busy road with views of lagoons, rice paddies, and stilt houses. Take Tran Hung Dao Street to Cua Dai Street to the east of town and follow it for 3km (2 miles). The beach is thin and crowded with hawkers, but there are cozy deck chairs (for a small fee). The sand, surf, and setting, with views of the nearby Cham Islands, are worth the trip. In season (Mar–Sept), tour companies will tout boat excursions to the **Cham Islands,** a group of seven islands about 13km (8 miles) east of Hoi An; prices vary, but expect to pay about 30,000VND ($1.70/£1.10). Contact the tourist cafes in town for details. Boat trips on the Thu Bon River are another option.

My Son ★★

My Son, some 40km (25 miles) from Hoi An and 71km (44 miles) from Danang, is an important temple ruin of the Cham people, a once-powerful Hindu empire. The temples were constructed as a religious center for citizens of the Cham capital, Danang, from the 7th through 12th centuries during the height of Cham supremacy. My Son (pronounced *mee sun*) might also have been used as a burial site for Cham kings after cremation. Originally, there were more than 70 towers and monuments at the site, but bombing during the war with the U.S. (the Viet Cong used My Son as a munitions warehouse) has sadly reduced many to rubble. Additionally, many of the smaller structures have been removed to the Cham Museum in Danang. The complex is a very serene and spiritual setting, however, and what does remain is powerful and evocative. It's not hard to imagine what a wonder My Son must once have been.

Much of what remains today are structures built or renovated during the 10th century, when the cult of Shiva, founder and protector of the kingdom, was predominant in the Cham court. Each group had at least the following structures: a **kalan,** or main tower; a **gate tower** in front of that, with two entrances; a **mandapa,** or meditation hall; and a

repository building for offerings. Some have towers sheltering stelae with kingly epitaphs. A brick wall encircles the compound.

Architecturally, the temple complex shows Indian influences. Each temple grouping is a microcosm of the world. The foundations are earth, the square bases are the temple itself, and the pointed roofs symbolize the heavens. The entrance of the main tower faces east, and surrounding smaller towers represent each continent. A trench, representing the oceans, surrounds each group. Vietnamese architecture is represented in decorative patterns and boat-shape roofs.

Group A originally had 13 towers. A-1, the main tower, was a 21m-high (69-ft.) masterpiece before it was destroyed in 1969. Group B bears the marks of Indian and Indonesian influence. Note that B-6 holds a water repository for statue-washing ceremonies. Its roof is carved with an image of the godVishnu sitting beneath a 13-headed snake god, or naga. Group C generally followed an earlier architectural style called Hoa Lai, which predominated from the 8th to the beginning of the 9th century. Groups G and H were the last to be built, around the end of the 13th century.

Arrange a half-day trip to My Son with any tourist agent in Hoi An (see "Visitor Information & Tours," earlier in this section). Entrance to the site is 50,000VND ($2.80/£1.90); a private half-day tour with a guide is $35 (£23) for a car and $43 (£29) for a van. The half-day seat-in-coach tour by **Sinh Café** costs $2 (£1.30) per person and is nothing more than a ride here, with no explanations. Less frequent tours also depart from Danang.

10 NHA TRANG ★

Welcome to Vietnam's Ocean City. The capital of Khanh Hoa Province, Nha Trang has a full-time population of about 200,000, but it far exceeds that with the heavy local and international tourist influx, especially in summer. While it's not a particularly charming town, the surf isn't bad and the beach is breathtaking, with views of more than 20 surrounding islands. There is a growing collection of high-end hotels and resorts here, as well as good budget options. Dining is all about fresh seafood.

Nha Trang is also a very popular vacation spot for Vietnamese; especially in the summer months, the town is chockablock with tourists and young kids out cruising the strip on motorbikes—a bit much for folks looking to relax. It's a fine place to spend 2 or 3 days frolicking in the surf, snorkeling and diving, or taking a cruise to the nearby islands.

Culturally, there are a few things to keep you occupied. The **Pasteur Institute** offers a glimpse into the life and work of one of Vietnam's most famous expats; also interesting are the **Long Son Pagoda** and the well-preserved **Po Nagar Cham Temple.**

If you're traveling in the off season, from October to March, note that the surf is far too rough for swimming and sports—you might want to rethink stopping at Nha Trang at all.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Nha Trang is 1,350km (837 miles) from Hanoi and 450km (279 miles) from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). There are daily connections on **Vietnam Airlines** (in Nha Trang at 91 Nguyen Thien Thuat St.; ✆ **058/826-768**) between the country's urban centers and nearby Dalat. The Nha Trang airport, once in the center of town, has traded places with a larger military facility and is now called **Cam Ranh Airport,** some 35km

ACCOMMODATIONS
Bao Dai's Villas **20**
Dong Phuong Hotel **12**
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DINING
Lac Canh **3**
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ATTRACTIONS
Alexandre Yersin Museum **5**
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(22 miles) north of town. The 30-minute taxi ride costs 150,000VND ($8.50/£5.65). The larger resorts offer more affordable group connections or limousine service.

BY TRAIN Nha Trang, a stop on the *Reunification Express,* is 12 hours from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) on a soft sleeper for 315,000VND ($18/£12), and 20 hours from Hanoi for 1,070,000VND ($60/£40). Buy your ticket at least a day in advance at the Nha Trang train station, at 17 Thai Nguyen St. (✆ **058/822-113**), or from any travel agent. There is convenient overnight connection with Ho Chi Minh.

BY CAR/BUS If you drive from Hoi An to Nha Trang, the 10-hour trip will cost about $120 (£80). An arduous 12-hour bus or minibus ride with a cafe tour bus will cost only $8 (£5.30). There are overnight schedules to Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An; the trip is long and tiring, but it's a good option if you're short on time and don't want to waste your precious daylight hours looking out the window of a tour bus.

GETTING AROUND

The main street in Nha Trang, **Tran Phu,** runs along a 4km (2½-mile) beach lined with the myriad minihotels and beach attractions that make the town center. **Biet Thu Street,** perpendicular to Tran Phu, is where you'll find lots of smaller restaurants and budget tour operators and tourist cafes.

Taxis are scarce, but a few tend to congregate around the major hotels. Renting a **bicycle** from your hotel for 15,000VND to 30,000VND (85¢–$1.70/60p–£1.15) a day is a good option, as are cyclos, which you can rent for $3 (£2) per hour from your hotel. A **cyclo** ride across town will cost about 10,000VND (55¢/35p). In addition, **motorcycle taxis** can be had for 20,000VND ($1.10/75p) per hour and on short trips starting at 5,000VND (30¢/20p).

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

All hotels in Nha Trang can book city tours, day boat trips, or onward travel to your next destination.

One-day city tours visit Long Son Pagoda, Bao Dai's Villas, the Oceanographic Institute, and Cham Tower. Country tours take you to Ba Ho Waterfall and secluded Doc Let Beach, as well as Monkey Island. ***Important:*** No matter what anyone tells you, Monkey Island is not worth the trip, especially if you like animals and don't like wasting your time (you can just buy a "monkeys on bikes" postcard and be done with it).

For bus tickets and connection to Dalat, contact **TM Brothers Café** (22B Tran Hung Dao St.; ✆ **058/814-556**), **Sinh Café III** (10 Biet Thu St.; ✆ **058/811-981**), or **An Phu** (1/24 Tran Quang Khai St.; ✆ **058/524-471**).

Fast Facts Nha Trang

Currency Exchange The local **Vietcombank** branch is at 17 Quang Trung St. (✆ **058/821-483**). Hours are 7:30 to 11am and 1:30 to 4pm. It offers the usual currency and traveler's-check exchange as well as credit card cash advances. Along Biet Thu, some of the tour operators will cash traveler's checks and change money—rates are the same as at the bank (except for a small service fee), and they're open longer hours.

Internet Access Biet Thu has a cluster of Internet cafes that charge between 200VND and 300VND (a couple of cents) per minute.

Mail The main post office is at 4 Le Loi St. (✆ **058/823-866**). Hours are Monday through Saturday from 6:30am to 10pm. **DHL** express services and Internet access are available. There is another branch at 50 Le Thanh Ton St.

Telephones The city code for Nha Trang is **58.**

WHERE TO STAY

There are 270 minihotels in Nha Trang, most quite basic and geared to the summer influx of Vietnamese vacationers. Evason Ana Mandara Resort (see below) still stands in a class all its own, but recent construction means there are a few mid- and high-range choices, and development on outlying islands (see VinPearl and the new Six Senses Hideaway, below) adds even more options.

Very Expensive

Evason Ana Mandara & Six Senses Spa — Nha Trang ★★★ (Kids) One of the finest resorts in the region, the Ana Mandara is a real seaside dreamscape. The name means "beautiful home" in the Cham language, and, though it comes with a high price tag, the hospitality extended here is quite sincere. The staff is very kind, and such personalized service in a beautiful beachside setting, with fine dining and a host of activities, means you won't want to leave. Recent renovations added a large, luxurious pool and a spa with outdoor massage areas. But it's the little things that make this resort special: in-room touches such as slippers and umbrellas, the basin of rainwater on your private veranda for rinsing sandy feet, and the burning incense in the open-air lobby. Each room is double-height and airy with wood beams, rattan ceiling, and stylish furniture. Bathrooms have a large window facing a private outdoor enclosure, like your own Zen garden. Thirty-six units face the beach, while others look onto a courtyard with exotic plants. The Pavilion (p. 345) has the best food and atmosphere in town; the new beachside eatery is tops, too. The resort offers lots of great excursions, including informative market tours where guests can learn about Vietnam cuisine and find out where it all comes from. Tai chi and yoga classes are also available.

Beachside, off Tran Phu Blvd., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/352-2222.** Fax 058/352-5828. www.sixsenses.com. 74 units. High season $301–$460 (£201–£307) double, $564 (£376) Ana Mandara suite; low season $266–$409 (£177–£273) double, $515 (£343) Ana Mandara suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 large outdoor pools w/hot tub; tennis court; health club; fine spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports rentals; cyclo rental ($10–$20/£6.65–£13 per hour); concierge; tour desk and in-house tour programs (diving can be arranged); business center; shopping; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; library w/games and Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV/DVD, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Six Senses Hideaway at Ninh Van Bay ★★★ This cluster of private villas hidden in a secluded cove in Ninh Van Bay, north of the city, can only be reached by boat and is as good as it gets in Nha Trang. Each three-room villa has its own private pool, outdoor shower, and butler, and the Hideaway premise to keep natural surroundings intact means you almost feel marooned. All units at this resort, a sister to Evason Ana Mandara (see above), share a pristine beach, but it's the surrounding forest and mountains that make the place special. Choose a villa on the beach, on the hillside, or perched

on huge boulders on the water. The spa menu is extensive, and the service is top-notch. It's a great place for a honeymoon—or to get hitched, as there's a wedding chapel on-site. ***A word of warning:*** Once you're here, it's hard to leave. No boats run after dark, and there's only one restaurant and bar. Not the place for partyers, but a nice place to disappear for a day or two.

Ninh Van Bay, Ninh Hoa, north of Nha Trang. Get information at Evason Ana Mandara Nha Trang, beachside, off Tran Phu Blvd., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/352-2222.** Fax 058/352-4704. www.sixsenses.com. 58 units. High season $884–$1,324 (£589–£883) villa, $2,551 (£1,701) presidential villa; low season $734–$1,174 (£489–£783) villa, $2,401 (£1,601) presidential villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; tennis court; health club; fine spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports rentals; tour desk and in-house tour programs; business center w/Internet access; room service; massage; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms; library; Dive Masters; butler. *In villa:* A/C, satellite TV/DVD, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Sunrise Beach Resort Nha Trang ★ The grand edifice of the Sunrise Beach Resort is all polished marble and white columns. The massive hotel is 10 floors of pomp, a bit like an oversize mafia don's palace, but everything about the place is shiny and new. Large rooms are simple and tastefully decorated in a soothing off-white, all with great views of ocean-side Tran Phu Street and the beach. The second-floor circular pool is surrounded by ostentatious columns, but makes for a luxurious getaway. Dining options are many, and the rooftop rotunda houses a classy lounge with views of the big blue beyond.

12 Tran Phu St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/820-999.** Fax 058/822-866. www.sunrisenhatrang.com.vn. 120 units. $138–$148 (£92–£99) double; $168 (£112) deluxe; $178 (£119) studio; $198 (£132) club room; $298 (£199) junior suite; $398–$498 (£265–£332) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; small health club and spa; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

VinPearl Resort & Spa ★ The verdict is still out on the VinPearl, but this enormous resort on Bamboo Island, a 10-minute boat ride from coastal Nha Trang, gets an A for effort. Everything on the island, from construction materials to the very water that comes out of the taps, is transported by large tankers—an incredible undertaking. Guests connect via a fleet of sturdy, high-speed crafts that keep a regular schedule (usually every 30 min.). Rooms are large and comfortable, though plain. The resort is designed in an arc around the vast central pool—reputedly the largest in the region, with fun slides, meandering river areas, and bridges, all overlooking a secluded bay. The VinPearl offers lots of activities, group trips, a top-notch watersports facility, a scuba school, and a variety of classes, from yoga to "crazy cricket" (you have to ask what it is). Dining is familiar but uninspired. The resort is just getting up and running, which means good incentive packages are on offer. VinPearl is so far a favorite with wealthy Vietnamese weekenders and Korean group tours, but time will tell. They're talking about a casino in the future.

7 Tran Phu, Vinh Nguyen, Nha Trang. Connect by boat from the pier on beachside Tran Phu, just south of Evason Ana Mandara. ✆ **058/598-188.** Fax 058/598-199. www.vinpearlresort.com. 485 units. $150–$190 (£100–£127) double (depending on view); $220 (£147) junior suite; $250–$1,750 (£167–£1,167) presidential suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; enormous outdoor pool; tennis courts; health club; luxe Shiseido Spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; extensive watersports rental; children's center; concierge; tour desk; car rental (on mainland); business center w/Internet access; shopping; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Yasaka Saigon Nhatrang Resort Hotel & Spa ★★ On the main strip overlooking Tran Phu and the ocean blue, this Japan/Vietnam joint venture bridges the gap between the ultraluxe resorts and low-end minihotels—a good compromise. Rooms have all the basic amenities and are about as cozy as your favorite highway hotel chain back home. Upper-level units have good views of the sea, some with balconies; the vista from corner suites is quite spectacular and worth the upgrade. The standard superior rooms are comfortable, if bland; the deluxe rooms, on higher floors, are the best bet for atmosphere. Service is friendly, there are lots of good on-site dining options (the Red Onion is a local favorite), the pool is small but inviting, and it's just a short hop across busy Tran Phu Street to the beach.

18 Tran Phu St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/820-090.** Fax 058/820-000. www.yasanhatrang.com. 201 units. $118–$198 double (£79–£132); from $250 (£167) suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; nightclub; outdoor pool w/ocean view; tennis court; small health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; all rentals available; Saigontourist tour desk; car rental; business center; room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, safe.

Moderate

Bao Dai's Villas ★★ Built in 1923 as a seaside resort for then-emperor Bao Dai, the hotel is a cluster of plain colonial-style buildings set high on an ocean-side hill south of Nha Trang—so far south that you're in the next town, really. There's an interesting Gothic quality to the place, and one could certainly imagine a king wandering the promontory at night, watching the hotel's lighthouse scan the sea and sky, and worrying about the loss of his kingdom (which was the case). Bao Dai's very room is the master suite, which makes for a memorable stay. The less-expensive units are musty monks' cells, but the villa-style rooms have high ceilings and large, shuttered windows overlooking the coast—a good bet. The higher-end rooms vary, but all are palatial in size even if lacking in amenities. The bathrooms are nothing special, but are sizable and clean, with tubs. Some of the buildings have creaky old wooden staircases and rooftop access. The restaurant serves buffet breakfasts and delicious evening meals for little money. The staff can arrange private boat trips.

Cau Da, Vinh Nguyen, Nha Trang. ✆ **058/590-147** or 058/590-148. Fax 058/590-146. www.vngold.com/nt/baodai. 48 units. $25–$50 (£17–£33) standard; $70 (£47) superior; $80 (£53) suite. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bicycle/motorbike rental; in-house tour desk for island/snorkeling trips; car rental; souvenir shop; limited room service; laundry service; Internet access (500VND/5¢/5p per min.). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Nha Trang Lodge Hotel ★ This well-run, 12-story high-rise has average-size rooms in chain-hotel style, with clean carpets, floral bedspreads, and marble finishes in the bathroom. Spring for an oceanview room with balcony (on an upper floor away from street noise, if possible). It's a nice, uninspired, affordable standard here—a bit like the younger, less-accomplished brother of the Yasaka (see above).

42 Tran Phu St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/521-500** or 058/521-900. Fax 058/521-800. www.nhatranglodge.com. 121 units. $65–$95 (£43–£63) double; $140 (£93) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; small fitness center; sauna; tour desk; car rental; business center; salon; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Que Huong Hotel A Khanh Hoa Tourism property, like the Vien Dong Hotel (see below), this is a bright, bland, four-story block just across the street from the beach—quiet and convenient. Rooms surround a large central courtyard and pool. All are average size, with clean but worn carpets, pastel tones, nice padded wooden furniture, and balconies.

There are signs of wear here and there, like crumbly tile bathrooms, but the suites are huge and a nice option for families (some even have two bathrooms). This is the land of the tour group, though, and the staff is not versed in individual graces; in high season, the front desk is run like a busy deli: "Next!" That said, it's affordable, clean, and close to the beach, and the pool is quite lovely. Nice amenities include an Asian/Continental restaurant, small pool hall, fun little disco, and capable travel agents in the lobby.

60 Tran Phu St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/525-047** or 058/522-365. Fax 058/523-344. www.nhatrangtourist.com.vn. 56 units. 600,000VND ($34/£23) double; 1,200,000VND ($68/£453) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar/club/karaoke lounge; nice outdoor pool; tennis; sauna; billiards; tour desk; car rental; small business center w/Internet access; salon; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Vien Dong Hotel Connected with Hai Yen Hotel, another large government tour-agency hotel, the Vien Dong is showing its age after years of heavy tour-group use, but it's still a relatively comfortable three-star with all the amenities. The large pool is a highlight. Smallish rooms have tatty carpet, simple wood furnishings, and sturdy foam mattresses. Bathrooms are clean but bare. A college dorm room comes to mind. Suites are not worth the extra cost. An inviting outdoor restaurant features cultural music and dance shows. You're sure to meet other travelers here, and the general atmosphere is friendly, which helps. The staff, though taxed by the many groups coming and going, is kind and helpful. The **Hai Yen,** next door at 42 Tran Phu St. (✆ **058/522-422**), is a similar standard but *really* showing its age.

1 Tran Hung Dao St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/523-606** or 058/521-608. Fax 058/521-912. www.nhatrangtourist.com.vn. 100 units. 300,000VND–500,000VND ($17–$28/£11–£19) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities** (shared w/Hai Yen Hotel): Large restaurant; open-air poolside bar; big outdoor pool; tennis courts; bicycle rental; tour desk; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; Internet access (1,000VND/10 min., or 5¢/5p per minute). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Dong Phuong Hotel ★ It's function, not form, in this motel-style block that's typical of the budget accommodations in town (this is one of three properties of the same name and standard in Nha Trang). Rooms are bright but spartan, with not much more than a bed and a shower-in-room style of bathroom. Some units have a good city view. If you're lucky, you'll be blessed with a classy nude done in painted tile mosaic in the bathroom (the only decoration we could find throughout). Family rooms are a good value, and the penthouse room adjoins a huge rooftop area with 360-degree views of town. It's your standard minihotel service, though: just rooms.

103 Nguyen Thien Thuat St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/526-986** or 058/526-247. Fax 058/526-986. dongphuongnt@dng.vnn.vn. 47 units. $6–$18 (£4–£12) double; $25 (£17) deluxe (family). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tours can be arranged; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer.

Golden Hotel You'll get little more than a surly welcome and a room, but with no other expectations than these, you can't go too wrong. Private spaces in this hotel are actually quite nice, done with dark-wood trim, crown molding, and filigree—cozier than other basic minihotels in the area. Amenities are bare-bones: just good tour services and a lobby safe-deposit box.

1K–2K Hung Vuong, Nha Trang. ✆ **058/524-496.** Fax 058/524-498. 31 units. $20–$25 (£131–£17) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Sea View Hotel Here's another good, relatively new, and clean option comparable to those above. The Sea View is right in the heart of the busy backpacker area, and you'll

have to be on a higher floor to get any actual sea view, but rooms are large, simple, and clean, with tile floors and showerin-room-style bathrooms. Some units have balconies. Amenities are few, but the hotel is convenient to the busy downtown.

4 Biet Thu St., Nha Trang. ✆ **058/524-333.** Fax 058/524-335. seaviewhotel@dng.vnn.vn. 60 units. $12–$20 (£8–£13) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

WHERE TO DINE

Expensive

Pavilion ★★★ ASIAN/CONTINENTAL Without question the finest dining on this beautiful stretch of coast, the Pavilion is the jewel in the crown of the Evason Ana Mandara Resort, serving exquisite cuisine in elegant, natural surroundings. Whether you're perched on the oceanfront veranda, shaded by a canvas umbrella in the courtyard, or dining by candlelight over the open ocean on the seaside jetty, the location alone is breathtaking. The food is creatively prepared and beautifully presented. The ever-evolving roster of local and seasonal specials means anything from sandwiches (made with bread baked on-site) and imported cheese to local favorites such as banana-flower salads and even sushi done to a T for the many Japanese guests. Don't miss the seafood hot pot, served in a coal-fired crock and brimming with the catch of the day delicately stewed with vegetables. There is an excellent daily lunch buffet, and evening set menus are a great value. This is the best choice for romantic ambience and fine dining.

At the Evason Ana Mandara Resort, Tran Phu Blvd. ✆ **058/522-222.** Main courses $5–$32 (£3.30–£21); prix-fixe menus $35–$65 (£23–£43). AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Moderate

Ngoc Suong ★★ SEAFOOD Nha Trang has dozens of good seafood restaurants, but this one leads the pack. Whether in the very pleasant thatched outdoor pavilion or the vaguely nautical, softly lit interior, it's "seafood as you like it" served by a helpful, friendly staff. Whole fish and crustaceans can be chosen by pointing at the large tank and smiling greedily; the day's catch, including shrimp and crab, is ordered by the pound, grilled, fried, or boiled with basic spices such as tamarind or pepper and lemon. The oysters, if available, are small but succulent. The name of the restaurant refers to a delicate marinated whitefish salad, one of the specialties and a great appetizer. This is a popular local and expat favorite.

96A Tran Phu (south of the town center at beachside). ✆ **058/525-656.** Main courses 20,000VND–240,000VND ($1.10–$14/75p–£9.05). No credit cards. Daily 10am–midnight.

Nha Trang Sailing Club ★ VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL Stop by this open-air bar/restaurant for a real Western breakfast, if nothing else. A good bet is the pancakes, not greasy (as usual) and served with real butter. Other menu items include tasty (though not authentic) burgers and macaroni and cheese, plus the usual Nha Trang seafood selections. There are now different "stations" for dining here, including good Japanese eats, an Italian menu, and even an Indian menu. The setting, in a large hut just off the beach, can't be beat. You can lounge on the beach, buy or swap a book from the well-stocked rack, and book a boat tour or a day of scuba with Rainbow Divers. The bar swings at night.

72–74 Tran Phu St. ✆ **058/826-528.** Main courses 30,000VND–125,000VND ($1.70–$7.05/£1.10–£4.70). No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm. Bar until 2am.

Nha Trang Seafood ★★ SEAFOOD/VIETNAMESE Popular with Japanese groups (or local fat cats out to impress their mistresses), Nha Trang Seafood serves it

fresh, just as you like it: grilled, steamed, or fried. Viet-style preparation is sweet, sour, and/or spicy; grilled items are a good way to go. The shrimp in coconut, clay-pot dishes, and hot pots are affordable and delicious. The atmosphere is plain and dull by the light of day; it's best by candlelight on the second floor when the place is crowded. The staff is fun-loving and friendly.

46 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai St. ✆ **058/822-664.** Main courses 25,000VND–200,000VND ($1.40–$11/95p–£7.50). No credit cards. Daily 9:30am–10pm.

Inexpensive

Lac Canh ★★ CHINESE/VIETNAMESE Two words: grilled shrimp. The Chinese-influenced Vietnamese cuisine here is all about the ingredients, so go for the basics: fresh seafood in a light marinade that you grill yourself on a rustic, cast-iron brazier. The new location is a little more airy, but try to sit outdoors because the atmosphere is smoky. This is definitely the town's "greasy spoon," packed with both locals and tourists, and it makes for a fun evening.

44 Nguyen Binh Khiem. ✆ **058/821-391.** Main courses 45,000VND–220,000VND ($2.50–$12/£1.70–£8.30). No credit cards. Daily 9am–9:30pm.

Romy's Ice Cream and Coffee Bar ★ Kids VIETNAMESE/WESTERN This ice-cream parlor, in the middle of the backpacker area, is a good place to meet fellow wanderers over a snack or breakfast. The owners and staff are friendly, the list of fruit shakes is as long as a sunny beachside day, and the ice cream is tops. Opt for the strawberry shake for a quick pick-me-up.

1C Biet Thu. ✆ **058/527-677.** Cones 20,000VND/scoop ($1.10/75p); sundaes 70,000VND–80,000VND ($3.95–$4.50/£2.60–£3). No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

Truc Linh Restaurant ★ VIETNAMESE The eclectic menu here has everything from the backpacker standbys of fried rice and noodles to sirloin steak and T-bone. It's got fondue and clay-pot specials, barbecued beef on clay tile, and delicious rice-paper spring rolls with shrimp. Or you can choose your own jumbo shrimp, crab, squid, or fresh fish of the day and then have it weighed and cooked to your taste.

18A Biet Thu St. ✆ **058/521-089.** Main courses 40,000VND–250,000VND ($2.25–$14/£1.50–£9.40). No credit cards. Daily 6am–11pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Alexandre Yersin Museum ★★ Here you can get an inkling of the work of one of Vietnam's greatest heroes. Swiss doctor Alexandre Yersin founded Dalat, isolated a plague-causing bacteria, and researched agricultural methods and meteorological forecasting, all to the great benefit of the Vietnamese. He founded the institute in 1895. On display are his desk, overflowing library, and scientific instruments.

In the Pasteur Institute, 10 Tran Phu St. ✆ **058/822-355.** Admission 26,000VND ($1.45/95p). Mon–Sat 8–11am and 2–4:30pm.

Long Son Pagoda ★ The main attraction at this 1930s pagoda is the huge white Buddha on the hillside behind it, the symbol of Nha Trang. Around the base of the Buddha are portraits of monks who immolated themselves to protest the corrupt Diem regime. After climbing the numerous flights of stairs, you'll be rewarded with a bird's-eye view of Nha Trang.

Thai Nguyen St. Free admission. Daily 8am–5pm.

Po Ngar Cham Towers ★ Starting in the 8th century, the Cham people, an early Hindu empire in central Vietnam (see "Who Are the Cham?" p. 310), built the Po Ngar Cham temple complex to honor Yang Ino Po Ngar, mother of the kingdom. Set on the site of an earlier wooden temple burned by the Javanese in a.d. 774, there were originally 10 structures here; today, just four remain. The main tower, or Po Ngar Kalan, is one of the tallest Cham structures ever built. Its square tower and three-story cone roof are exemplary of Cham style. It has more remaining structural integrity than many sites, giving you a good idea of how it might have looked in all its glory. In the vestibule, you can see two pillars of carved epitaphs of Cham kings; in the sanctuary, there are two original carved doors. The statue inside is of the goddess Bharagati (also called Po Ngar) on her lotus throne. It was carved in 1050. The Po Ngar temples are still in use by local Buddhists, and the altars and smoking incense add to the intrigue of the architecture. Detracting from the whole experience are the kitsch stands and lots of hawkers.

2 Thang 4, at the end of Xom Bong Bridge (2km/1¼ miles out of the city center). Admission 10,000VND (55¢/35p). Daily 7:30am–5pm.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Diving is big in Nha Trang, in season (Mar–Sept). There are a number of professionally run operations here; whether you're a beginner or an expert, make your choice based on safety more than anything. **Rainbow Divers** (90A Hung Vuong St.; ✆ **058/524-351;** www.divevietnam.com) has taken advertising to the level of pollution in Nha Trang, with seemingly every storefront claiming a connection, but these guys really are among the best in town. You can book with them anywhere—try the **Nha Trang Sailing Club** (✆ **058/826-528;** see "Where to Dine," above). For a guaranteed safe and fun time, try the folks at **Octopus Diving** (62 Tran Phu St.; ✆ **058/810-629;** octopusdivingclub@yahoo.com; or through the Evason Ana Mandara Resort), where the expert, mostly expat staff can devise dives for any and all. **Vietnam Explorer** (30 Nguyen Thuat St.; ✆ **058/524-490**) is another good outfit.

Also popular are the 1-day boat cruises to some of Nha Trang's 20 surrounding islands. For years, Nha Trang was famed for rowdy trips that were more like daytime raves. **Hahn's Green Hat Boat Tour** (2C Biet Thu St.; ✆ **058/824-494**) is the longtime favorite, a remnant of the old "Mama Hahn" days (Mama Hahn was famous for saying, "Smoke and drink! Don't be lazy!"), but the trips have toned down significantly. **Mama Linh** (✆ **058/826-693**) offers similar tours, as do **Sinh Café** and **TM Brothers** (see "Visitor Information & Tours," at the beginning of this section). The going rate is $7 (£4.65) per day and includes a 9am hotel pickup and afternoon drop-off. The mellow day of motoring through lovely bays to three different islands guarantees you some snorkeling, a big feast for lunch, and a great spread of fruit in the afternoon. Beer and drinks are available all day (at one point, you can swim out to a floating bar for complimentary wine). The tour terminates at a fish farm and a small harbor, where you can rent a traditional bamboo-basket boat to paddle about. Just about everyone in town will want to book you on one of these tours, so ask at any hotel front desk and be sure to nail down all specifics (meals, transport included, and so forth).

For sailing, contact the **Nha Trang Sailing Club** (✆ **058/826-528**) or the **Evason Ana Mandara Resort** (✆ **058/522-222**). Go for a Hobie Cat if it's available and hire a captain if you are not experienced; the strong ocean breezes and choppy waters will make for a memorable sail. Runabouts and jet skis are also available.

If you want to get to the popular **Thapba Mud Bath & Hotspring Resort** (15 Ngoc Son, Ngoc Diep; ✆ **058/834-939**), just outside town, hire a car or ask any hotel fr ont desk to call the resort directly for you.

NHA TRANG AFTER DARK

Nha Trang has a few lively beachfront bars where tourists congregate to swap stories. The **Nha Trang Sailing Club** (72–74 Tran Phu St., across from the Hai Yen Hotel) has open-air bamboo huts and a dance scene on some nights until late (it gets pr etty seedy past midnight). **Crazy Kim Bar** (19 Biet Thu St.; ✆ **058/816-072**), in the backpacker area, is open late and asks customers to "B e hot. Be cool. Be crazy. Just be." There are many versions of that mantra around town, and it's popular with the diving crowd and the few expats here. **Guava,** next door to Kim's at 17 Biet Thu, has a similar scene.

11 DALAT

Known as "Le Petit Paris" by the early builders and residents of this hillside resort town, Dalat is still considered a kind of luxury retreat for city dwellers and travelers tired from trudging along sultr y coastal Vietnam. In Dalat, you can play golf on one of the finest courses in I ndochina, visit beautiful temples, and enjo y the to wn's honeymoon atmosphere and delightfully hokey tourist sights.

At 1,500m (4,920 ft.) elevation, Dalat is mercifully cool year-round—there's no need for air-conditioning here—and is a unique blend of pastoral hillside Vietnam and E uropean alpine resort. Alexander Yersin, the Swiss geologist who first traipsed across this pass, established the town in 1897 as a resort for French commanders weary of the Vietnamese tropics. In and around town are still scattered the relics of colonial mansions, as w ell as some serene pagodas in a lo vely natural setting—y ou've escaped fr om big-city Vietnam for r eal here. You can also visit the small villages of a fe w ethnic minorities, including the Lat and the Koho, who live in and around the picturesque hills surrounding Dalat.

Dalat is a top r esort destination for Vietnamese couples getting married or honeymooning. If the lunar astrological signs are particularly good, it's not unusual to see 10 or so wedding parties in a single day . Many of the local scenic spots, such as the Valley of Lo ve and Lake of S ighs, pander to the giddy couples. The waterfalls swarm with v endors, costumed bears, and "cowboys" complete with sad-looking horses and fake pistols. A carniv al air prevails. It's tacky, but it's one of those "so bad that it's good" feelings that's kind of fun.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE The only direct flights to D alat are from Ho Chi M inh City (flight time: 50 min.). O nce you're in D alat, you should call to confirm y our ticket. You can r each **Vietnam Airlines** at ✆ **063/822-895.** A taxi from the airport to the city is $3 (£2) and takes about 30 minutes.

BY BUS/CAR Dalat is the first stop on the open-tour bus fr om Ho Chi M inh City. Buses fr om both nor th and south first stop at P han Rang, an old Cham temple site, where the road turns inland for the hills of Dalat. The ride up is winding and spectacular at one point follo wing hairpin after hairpin beneath a large hy droelectric pr oject. The trip from Nha Trang (to the nor th) or Ho Chi M inh City (to the south) takes 7 hours and costs $5 (£3.30) at any tourist cafe. Alternativ ely, you can hire a private car for the trip and save about an hour.

GETTING AROUND

There are no cyclos in Dalat, but walking is very pleasant in the cool air. You can reach most of the city sights, such as the market and the lake, on foot. On weekends, the busy streets of the central city are closed to motorbike and auto traffic. Try **Dalat Taxi** (✆ **063/830-830**) if you need a cab in town.

Dalat is a good place to rent a **motorbike,** which will cost about $3 (£2) per day at the street-side places on Nguyen Thi Minh Khai (btw. the market and the lake), or $4 to $5 (£2.65–£3.30) from hotels and cafes. This is a good, adventurous way to get to all the funky sights outside the city. The winding roads will have you feeling like you're born to be wild, if you can forget that you're riding the motorcycle equivalent of a hair dryer. Be sure to check the brakes and the horn: You should beep-beep all the way, especially when passing or on curves.

Another option is to get a **motorbike with driver** (look for jackets with an Easyrider logo). You'll pay about $1 to $2 (65p–£1.30) per hour, or you can fix a rate for the day and the destinations. A **car with driver** runs about $25 (£17) per day. Because most sights are outside city limits, it makes sense to take a half- or full-day tour through your hotel or a tourist cafe.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Ecotours

Young U.S. expats Brian and Kim, of **Phat Tire Ventures** (73 Truong Cong Dinh; ✆ **063/829-422;** fax 063/820-331; www.phattireventures.com), can arrange anything from day treks to jungle expeditions, mountain biking (they have a stable of top-quality bikes and hold daily clinics), rock climbing, rappelling, or canyoning. Daily rates for most activities start at $22 (£15) and include lunch, transport, and a knowledgeable guide. Safety and environmental stewardship are their trademark. They also book classic tours through their affiliate, **Dalat Tours.**

Budget Tours

- **Sinh Café** (4A Bui Thi Xuan St.; ✆ **063/836-702**) has an information and tour office adjacent to Trung Cang Hotel, the company's budget accommodations (p. 352).
- **TM Brothers** (58 Truong Cong Dinh St.; ✆ **063/828-383**) can book standard budget tours for you from its office on "cafe street."
- **An Phu Tourist Co.** (7 Hai Thuong St.; ✆ **063/823-631**) is located here, too.

Fast Facts Dalat

Currency Exchange **Vietcombank** is at 6 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai St. (✆ **063/510-479;** open daily 7:30–11am and 1:30–4:30pm). You can exchange traveler's checks here and you'll also find an ATM that accepts most cards. There's also an ATM just outside the **Novotel** at 12 Tran Phu St. and at the top of the hill near the central market stalls (just up the street from the Lyla Hotel and Restaurant).

Internet Access The most accessible Internet cafe in town is at the roundabout near the western side of the Lake: **Post Shop,** 2 Le Dai Hanh (✆ **063/827-207**). Internet use is free with the purchase of coffee or tea. There are many others scattered about as well.

Mail The main post office is at 14 Tran Phu St., across from the Novotel. Open Monday through Saturday from 6:30am to 9:30pm.

Telephones The area code for Dalat is **63.** ***Note:*** Like other cities, Dalat has started increasing telephone numbers from six to seven digits. Not everyone is on the new system yet. If the number you call does not work, add "3" between the city code and the phone number, for example if "063/123-456" is out of service, try "063/312-3456."

WHERE TO STAY

With its long history as a resort area for both foreigners and Vietnamese, Dalat offers some choice lodgings. There are plenty of minihotels, but they're not of the quality you might find in Hanoi, for example. Keep an eye on new developments in the hills outside the city center. Efforts are underway to restore and preserve the many 1950s-era French colonial homes, and many are converting to guesthouses. **Villa 28** (28 Tran Hung Dao; ✆ **063/822-764**) is a very basic guesthouse, but a harbinger of things to come. ***Note:*** No Dalat hotels have air-conditioning; with the year-round temperate weather, none is needed.

Very Expensive

Evason Ana Mandara Villas & Six Senses Spa-Dalat ★★ For a real taste of colonial living, the Villas provide an experience unrivaled in Dalat. It's as though the designers made a trip back to the 1930s, bought up an entire neighborhood, and brought the whole place into the present. Twenty renovated villas are spread over 14 hectares (35 acres) a short ride from central Dalat, and all are as distinct as their first owners. Each is a thematic homage to French colonialist professions, from winemakers to archaeologists to the Citroën family, which used to sponsor a race from Paris to Vietnam. All the original structures have been retained, so floors are polished with age and creak in a nostalgic way that can't be replicated by new construction. Most villas are designed with guest rooms sharing a common area, but a private butler in each building means that even the most reclusive visitor will be satisfied. (For complete privacy, opt for the single-occupancy villa.) The grounds are sealed off from traffic and still heavily timbered with trees planted by the original French planners of Dalat; a crumbling church on a gardened hillside constitutes part of the view. The only sounds you hear might be the rumble of classic Citroën or Peugot cars, which carry guests to their villas.

Le Lai St., Ward 5, Dalat. ✆ **063/356-0719.** Fax 063/356-0718. www.sixsenses.com. 65 units. High season $221–$269 (£147–£179) double, $371–$515 (£247–£343) suite; low season $186–$234 (£124–£156) double, $336–$480 (£224–£320) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; heated outdoor pool; gym; spa; all rentals available; children's center; tour desk; business center; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; butler. *In room:* Satellite TV/DVD, minibar, hair dryer, safe.

Sofitel Dalat Palace ★★★ Opened in 1922 as the address of choice for French colonists on holiday and once headquarters of the occupying Japanese, this recently renovated beauty, with its understated old-world opulence, is one of the finest five-star choices in all of Indochina. From the huge fireplace and mosaic floor in the lobby to the hanging tapestries and 500 oil reproductions of classic European art, it's a French country château with a Southeast Asian colonial flair. The large rooms, with glossy original wood floors, are finished with fine fabrics and throw rugs, and all beds are crowned with an

ornate wooden housing for an ornamental mosquito net. The bathrooms feature hand-painted tiles and claw-foot tubs with antique-style fixtures. Foyers and fireplaces in every room complete the picture. Lakeview units open to a huge shared veranda with deck chairs. The high ceilings and huge corridors with hanging lamps contribute to the palatial feeling. Service is superb. All in all, this is an exquisite place that should not be missed.

The whole place is the brainchild of the late Larry Hillblom, the enigmatic American entrepreneur and co-owner of DHL who invested heavily in the property out of love and generosity as much as anything. He is still remembered and revered by the many who knew him; Larry's Bar, a great little grotto with a pool table, darts, and good pub grub, does his memory proud. The in-house dining at Le Rabelais (p. 353) is unrivaled. The hotel offers a tour of the city in a vintage Citroën that should not be missed if you want to learn a lot in a hurry about Dalat's colonial architecture.

12 Tran Phu St., Dalat. ✆ **063/382-5444.** Fax 063/382-5666. www.sofitel.com. 43 units. $340–$390 (£227–£260) double; $510–$600 (£340–£400) suite. Extra bed $40 (£27). Ask about discounts and specials. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; golf arrangements; heated outdoor pool; tennis; horseback riding/carriage rental; all rentals available; kids' playroom and outdoor playground; concierge; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; hotel history corner. *In room:* Satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Novotel Dalat ★★ This is the scaled-down companion hotel to the Sofitel Palace. Lovely renovations in 1997 converted the 1932 building, which was originally the Du Parc hotel. The lobby has a unique wrought-iron elevator. The smallish rooms have attractive historical touches: glossy wood floors, tastefully understated wood furniture, and high molded ceilings. A superior room (the lowest standard) is a bit cramped and not the greatest value, but deluxe rooms are clean, classy, and worth the upgrade. The bathrooms are efficient and spotless, with sleek granite and dark-wood trim. Everything is tidy and convenient, with local artwork throughout and a warm, homey atmosphere. The staff is businesslike and friendly, and the Novotel shares fine amenities with neighboring Sofitel Dalat Palace (see above).

7 Tran Phu St., Dalat. ✆ **800/221-4542** or 063/382-5777. Fax 063/382-5888. www.novotel.com. 139 units. $108–$128 (£72–£85) double; $148 (£99) suite. Ask about discounts and specials. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; golf arrangements; heated outdoor pool; tennis; all rentals available; concierge; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* Satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Empress Hotel ★★ This Hong Kong/Vietnamese joint venture is an upscale but affordable oasis just a stone's throw from the lake and close to all the action. Tucked into the side of a hill, the hotel has rooms that form a courtyard, with the steep gable of a European lodge-style reception and restaurant on one side and two floors of rooms (all facing the courtyard) on the other. The comfortable accommodations have dark-wood walls, terra-cotta tile floors, rattan furniture, nice local artwork, and elegant bedspreads. Bathrooms are large, with granite counters and nice fixtures, some with tubs and others an open arrangement with a combined shower/toilet area (like a guesthouse, but spotless). The suites are large and luxe, with a sunken tub and sitting area, but the deluxe rooms are a better deal, with views of the stone courtyard and lake below. Go for a room on the second floor, as those on the first are getting a bit musty. The restaurant serves good local and Continental fare; if the staff is slightly cool, it's almost refreshingly real of them. The hotel also has a great old Mercedes for rental or airport transfers.

5 Nguyen Thai Hoc St., Dalat. ✆ **063/833-888.** Fax 063/829-399. empr esdl@hcm.vnn.vn. $50–$75 (£33–£50) double (superior/deluxe); $90–$140 (£60–£93) suite. 20 units. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; car rental (classic Mercedes to airport for $20/£13); laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* Satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Golf III Hotel ★ The Golf is a three-star chain hotel and a good choice in Dalat (Golf I and II are low-end versions). Large rooms are upholstered in purple with gaudy carved-wood details. Some units are a bit frayed around the edges, but they're perfectly clean and comfortable. It's worth springing for a deluxe room ($50/£33), a Vietnamese honeymooner favorite, with parquet floors rather than carpet, and larger bathrooms with big sunken tubs. The constant stream of Vietnamese wedding parties in and out lends a welcome festive air to the place. Golf III is right in the center of the busy market area, but set back far enough from the road that rooms are relatively quiet. Amenities are basic, including a rooftop steam, sauna, and massage area (a little seedy); the lobby restaurant serves a fine breakfast. As the name implies, the Golf properties all have an arrangement with the local course at a good rate.

4 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai St. (near the market), Dalat. ✆ **063/826-042** or 063/826-049. Fax 063/830-396. 78 units. $60–$70 (£40–£47) double; $80–$100 (£53–£67) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; golf arrangements; sauna; steam room; tour desk; small business center; limited room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* Satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe.

Inexpensive

Hotel Dai Loi (Fortune Hotel) ★★ If you want value for money, look no further. The $25 (£14) rooms here have two double beds and large tubs; most have balconies as well. Even the lowest-priced rooms are terrific, with high ceilings, fresh paint, firm mattresses, marble floors, and nicely tiled bathrooms. Most other places in this category have musty smells and dingy decor, but not the Fortune. The place is spotless, the location is far enough from the town center for quiet yet close enough for access, and the price is right. The second-floor restaurant is open and inviting. The staff members speak little English but are quite helpful.

3A Bui Thi Xuan, Dalat. ✆ **063/837-333.** Fax 063/837-474. 39 units. $22–$26 (£15–£17) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; all rentals available; laundry service. *In room:* TV, minibar, fridge.

Trung Cang Hotel ★★ The Sinh Café expands its monopoly on budget-traveler services with this centrally located little gem. Rooms have clean tile floors and basic amenities. Time will tell with this place, but get here while it's new, ask to see a room, and do a bit of haggling. The folks at Sinh Café are always accommodating when arranging tours or getting you around town.

4A Bui Thi Xuan St., Dalat. ✆ **063/822-663.** Fax 063/836-701. 27 units. $20–$25 (£13–£17) double. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; all rentals available; tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* Satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

WHERE TO DINE

Dalat dining is pretty basic. Meals are simply prepared and heavily influenced by Chinese cuisine. The huge variety of local ingredients, particularly fruit and vegetables, makes for fresh-tasting food. Many small restaurants are located on **Phan Dinh Phung Street,** and some of the best dining, according to locals, is at the stalls in the **central market.** Do try the artichoke tea and strawberry jam, two local specialties (and good souvenirs to take home from the market).

Café de la Poste ★★ CONTINENTAL This cozy, colonial gem, part of the Sofitel Dalat Palace hotel, is located in an open, airy corner building across from the post office (go figure). It's more restaurant than cafe, really, and has a great selection of light choices, sandwiches, and desserts (don't miss the cheesecake), along with hearty entrees such as T-bone steak and fresh pasta. The salads are big and fresh, and the French onion soup is great. It's pricey for Dalat, but worth it.

12 Tran Phu St. ✆ **063/825-444.** Main courses $4–$39 (£2.65–£26). AE, MC, V. Daily 6am–10pm.

Dalat House ★ ASIAN/WESTERN It's out of the town center, so you'll have to take a cab, but that somehow adds to the experience of dining at this dolled-up new restaurant, a place where local businessmen go to impress clients. (Did someone hear the theme to *The Godfather*?) You'll find a mix of Asian and Western cuisine served on fine white china at candlelit, linen-covered tables. The best local choices are the stews that take the chill out of a cool Dalat evening: hot pot dishes great for sharing, or baked clay-pot specials. Western meals are all country-club standbys: meat and potatoes, fish, and pasta. If you crave steak, a house specialty, you have a choice of imported beef or locally grown at half the price (pay the extra for imported). Dessert is crème caramel, apple tart, or soufflé.

34 Nguyen Du (about 4km/2½ miles east of town, past the railway station). ✆ **063/811-577.** Main courses 80,000VND–250,000VND ($4.50–$14/£3–£9). No credit cards. Daily 6am–10pm.

Le Rabelais ★★ FRENCH A meal at Le Rabelais is a genuine French colonial fine-dining experience. Prices are high, but so is the standard of preparation and service. The Sofitel people work closely with local organic farms, thus all dishes are prepared with the finest fresh produce. In the tradition of the original 1922 Langbian Palace Hotel, Le Rabelais serves from a limited menu, which ensures that everything is done just right. Beginning with a tantalizing *amuse bouche,* dinner is a slow progression of delicious courses. The lobster bisque is rich, and the beef sirloin succulent and satisfying in a savory pepper sauce. The wine list is long and, unusual in this region, the staff knows the right suggestions for any given meal; in fact, the service here is efficient and professional, attentive without fawning or hovering, and meticulous with every detail. It's a great place to take that special someone for an evening of candlelit opulence. Follow up with coffee or after-dinner drinks and cigars down in the very atmospheric Larry's Bar.

At the Sofitel Dalat Palace, 12 Tran Phu St. ✆ **063/825-444.** Main courses $12–$25 (£8–£17); evening set menus $55–$65 (£37–£43). AE, MC, V. Daily 6am–10pm.

Long Hoa ★★ VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL On a busy street just opposite the hilltop cinema, this small bistro has checkered tablecloths and a cozy atmosphere. The owner, a vivacious, self-taught linguist, is very welcoming and will talk you through the menu, travel recommendations, or local lore in the language of your choice. You'll feel like a regular, or you will become one, even if you're in town for only a few days. The menu is grouped by ingredients (chicken, beef, fish) and lists any kind of sauté or steamed dish you can imagine, as well as a variety of hot pots and soups for those cold Dalat nights. It's inexpensive, excellent local fare with a French flair. Don't miss the homemade yogurt, a real treat.

6 Duong 3 Thang 2 (Duy Tan). ✆ **063/822-934.** Main courses 30,000VND–90,000VND ($1.70–$5.10/£1.10–£3.40). No credit cards. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 5–9pm.

Lyla Hotel and Restaurant de Famille ★ (Kids) VIETNAMESE/CONTINENTAL This is real family dining, heavy on good French, in a closed, quiet dining room along

Dalat's busy cafe street and a longtime expat favorite. Try a "real" Continental meal of French onion soup (absolutely delicious), fries with mayonnaise, and a niçoise salad. The menu features great steaks, pasta, and seafood, too. Very family friendly.

18A Nguyen Chi Thanh. ✆ **063/834-540.** Main courses 19,000VND –59,000VND ($1.05–$3.30/70p – £2.20). MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Ngoc Hai Restaurant ★ VIETNAMESE/CHINESE Just down the street from the market, this local spot is two floors of bright, clean, indoor/outdoor dining. It's nothing spectacular, but the staff is friendly and the menu is ambitious; ask for anything, and you'll hear hearty replies of "Have, have." Selections from the Western end of the spectrum include roasted chicken with potatoes and a mock-up of British fish and chips, but go for the Chinese-influenced Vietnamese stir-fries, one-dish meals, and soups. Reasonable set menus are a safe bet. Good veggie selections, too.

6 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai St. ✆ **063/825-252.** Main courses $5–$15 (£3.30–£10); set menus 140,000VND ($8.75/£5). No credit cards. Daily 9am–10pm.

V Café ★★ (Finds) CONTINENTAL It's good for the budget and good for the tummy here at homey V Café. Where else can you sit at a table with linen and candles and enjoy a great burger for a buck? You'll also find the only burritos in town here. The owner, V, and her husband, Michael, a longtime expat, serve up hospitality smothered in gravy and will welcome you as their own. The place is full of travelers and expats.

1/1 Bui Thi Xuan St. (across from Sinh Café). ✆ **063/837-576.** Main courses 10,000VND –40,000VND (55¢–$2.25/35p–£1.50). No credit cards. Daily 8:30am–10pm.

Snacks & Cafes

Nguyen Chi Thanh Street is lined with cafes, one indistinguishable from the next in many ways. Each building hangs over the main market street and all serve ice cream, tea, and beer to ogling couples. Try **Coffee Artista** (7 Nguyen Chi Thanh St.; ✆ **063/821-749**) for good ice cream, classic rock, and friendly folks. Just next door, the **Viethung Internet Café** (✆ **063/835-737**) has laid-back porch seating.

For a peek into the local arts scene, see if you can find Mr. **MPK** (you have to ask him what it means). He makes his home at the back of a little villa guesthouse overlooking a beautiful valley (Khach San Van Khanh; 11/8 Khoi Nghia Bac Son, up in the hills near the Bao Dai Palace II). MPK is an inspired photographer, best when he is up close to his subject. He uses a rusty old camera and turns the lens backward, shooting through a rough-hewn tube to get incredible macro close-ups. Have a coffee, peruse his photos, and buy something (if he's selling). Also see his works at **V Café** (see above).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Much of what there is to see in Dalat is natural: Lakes, water falls, and dams dominate the tourist trail. Sights are spread over quite some distance, so consider booking a tour or renting your own car or motorbike with driver. ***Note:*** Avoid visiting pagodas between 11:30am and 2pm, when nuns and monks have their lunch. You might disturb them and also miss a valuable opportunity for a chat. You should also leave 1,000 or 2,000 dong in the donation box near the altar.

Bao Dai's Palace ★ Completed in 1938, this monument to bad taste provided Bao Dai, Vietnam's last emperor, with a place of rest and respite with his family. It has never been restored and, indeed, looks veritably untouched since the emperor's ousting and hasty exile; on a busy weekend in high season, you might get a rush by pretending you're

here to liberate the place and are part of the looting masses—it's not hard to imagine, with the crowds ignoring any velvet ropes and posing for pictures in the aging velvet furniture. You'll be asked to go in stocking feet or wear loose shoe covers, which make it fun for sliding around the home's 26 rooms, including Bao Dai's office and the bedrooms of the royal family. You can still see the grease stains on Bao Dai's hammock pillow and the ancient steam bath in which he soaked. The explanations are in English; most concern Bao Dai's family members. There is pathos in reading them and piecing together the mundane fate of the former royals: One prince has a "technical" job, while another is a manager for an insurance company. There are three other Bao Dai palaces in town, the Sofitel Dalat Palace hotel among them, but this is the best choice.

South of Xuan Huong Lake and up the hill behind "Crazy House." No phone. Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Daily 7am–8pm.

Dalat Market (Cho Da Lat) ★★★ Huge, crowded, and stuffed with produce of all varieties, this is the top stroll-through destination in Dalat. Come see all the local specialties—and even have a try. Some of the vendors will be happy to give you a sample of local wine or a few candied strawberries. Dalat in general is low on the annoying touts who plague the big towns and tourist sights in Vietnam, and entreaties from the merchants here are friendly; you can walk around without too much hassle since the locals are doing all the shopping.

Central Dalat. Daily early morning–night.

Dalat Railway Station (Cremaillaire Railway) Built in 1943, the Dalat station offers an atmospheric slice of the area's colonial history. You can see an authentic old wood-burning steamer train on the tracks to the rear, and stroll around inside looking at the iron-grilled ticket windows, empty now. Although the steamer train no longer makes tourist runs, a newer Japanese train makes a trip to Trai Mat Street and the Linh Phuoc Pagoda (see below). The ride costs $5 (£2.75) and leaves when full.

Near Xuan Huong Lake, off Nguyen Trai St. Daily 8am–5pm.

French Quarter ★★ The whole town has the look and feel of a French replica, but on the ridge-running road, Tran Hung Dao, don't miss the derelict shells of the many French colonial summer homes; it's where the connected and successful came to escape the Saigon summer heat. Most are owned by the folks at Sofitel, and who's to say what will become of them in years to come, but they are a beautiful and eerie reminder of the recent colonial past. The road itself, one you'll take to many of the sights outside of town, offers panoramic views.

Follow Tran Hung Dao Rd. a few miles southeast from town. Some of the houses are on private roads at the ends of promontories. Best visited by motorbike or car with driver.

Lake of Sighs (Ho Than Tho) ★ This lake has such romantic connotations for the Vietnamese that you would think it was created by a fairy godmother rather than French dam work. Legend has it that a 15-year-old girl named Thuy drowned herself after her boyfriend of the same age, Tam, fell in love with another. Her gravestone supposedly still stands on the side of the lake, marked with the incense and flowers left by other similarly heartbroken souls (even though the name on the headstone reads thao, not thuy). The place is crammed with honeymooners in paddle boats and motorboats.

Northeast of town, along Ho Xuan Huong Rd. Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Daily 7am–5pm.

Lam Ty Ni Pagoda (Home of Thay Vien Thuc, "The Crazy Monk") A visit with the man is a highlight for some and just plain creepy for others. The temple itself is nothing special, though the immaculate garden in the back is nice, but the real attraction is the studio of Mr. Thuc, a Vietnamese Zen practitioner who seems to be painting, drawing, and scribbling his way to nirvana. It's a rare glimpse into the inner sanctum of a true eccentric, and though locals say that he's not a real monk, just a painter and salesman, it's an interesting visit. A polyglot afflicted with graphophilia perhaps (a language genius who can't stop drawing), Mr. Thuc has a message of peace and connectedness characteristic of the Zen sect, and he conveys that message in Vietnamese, Chinese, French, English, Japanese, German, and Swedish as he continually cranks out poems with small stylized drawings while you talk with him. For $1 (bargain if you will), he'll scribble an original before your eyes and pose for a photo. You're free to ask questions, browse his stacks of finished works in the studio, and sign the guest book. This is a standard stop on city/country tours.

2 Thien My. ✆ **063/821-775.** Free admission, but most feel obliged (or compelled) to buy one of his paintings.

Linh Phuoc Pagoda ★ Here is another example of one of Vietnam's fantasyland glass-and-ceramic mosaic structures. Refurbished in 1996, this modern temple features a huge golden Buddha in the main hall, plus three floors of walls and ceilings painted with fanciful murals. Go to the top floor for the eye-boggling Bodhisattva room and views of the surrounding countryside. In the garden to the right, there is a 3m-high (10-ft.) dragon climbing in and out of a small lake. You'll find very cool little nooks and crannies to explore.

At the end of Trai Mat St. (20 min. by car or bike). Daily 8am–5pm.

Prenn Falls ★ The falls are quite impressive, especially after a good rain. You can ride a rattle-trap cable car over them if you're brave, or else follow a stone path behind the falling water (prepare to get your feet wet). That's a minor thrill, of course, but the true Prenn experience is all about staged photos for Vietnamese tourists: couples preening, boys acting macho, and girls looking wan and forlorn. Professional photographers run the show and pose their willing actors on a small wooden bridge, on the back of a costumed horse, with an arm around a guy in a bear suit, on a small inflatable raft in front of the falls, or perched in one of the cool treehouses high above (be careful of the loose rungs when climbing up). Come here to have a laugh and observe until you find out that, as a foreign tourist, it's you that's being observed; in that case, say "Xin Chao" or return a few hellos and go from there (you'll be getting your photo snapped for sure). You might walk away with some new chums, not to mention some tourist tchotchkes, if that's your wont (plastic samurai sword, anyone?).

At the foot of Prenn Mountain pass, 10km (6¼ miles) from Dalat. Admission 6,000VND (30¢/20p). Daily 7am–5pm.

Thien Vuong Pagoda ★ Otherwise known as the Chinese Pagoda, built as it was by the local Chinese population, this 1958 structure is unremarkable except for its serene setting among the hills of Dalat and the very friendly nuns who inhabit it. It does have three awe-inspiring sandalwood Buddhist statues that have been dated to the 16th century: Dai The Chi Bo Tat, god of power; Amitabha or Sakyamuni, Buddha; and Am Bo Tat, god of mercy. Each is 4m (13 ft.) high and weighs 1½ tons.

3km (2 miles) southeast of town at the end of Khe Sanh St. Daily 9am–5pm.

Truc Lam (Bamboo Forest) Zen Monastery ★★ What's refreshing is that you can walk around Truc Lam with no harassment, unlike many other temples and most pagodas in Vietnam. This is a working temple, and though it's packed with tourists at certain times of the day, you'll be wandering amid meditation halls and classrooms that are utilitarian, not museum pieces. You'll get to see monks at work and have an informative glimpse into the daily rhythms of temple life. The complex was completed in 1994 with the aim of giving new life to the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect, a uniquely Vietnamese form of Zen founded during the Tran Dynasty (1225–1400). Adherents practice self-reliance and realization through meditation. The shrine, the main building, is notable mainly for its simple structure and peaceful air. There is a large relief sculpture of Bodhidarma, Zen's wild-eyed Indian heir, at the rear of the main temple. The scenery around the monastery, with views of the nearby man-made lake, Tuyen Lam Lake, and surrounding mountains is breathtaking. Truc Lam can now be reached by a scenic **tram ride** from a hilltop overlooking Dalat; a motorbike or taxi to the tram station costs little, and the round-trip is 50,000VND ($2.80/£1.90).

Near Tuyen Lam Lake, 6k m (3 ¾ miles) from Dalat. A popular spot on any countryside tour. Daily 7am–5pm.

Valley of Love ★★ The Valley of Love is scenic headquarters in Dalat and a popular stopover for honeymooners. It's a good place to find some real bizarre kitsch, the kind whose precedent can only be roadside America. We're talking guys in bear suits and huge-headed cowboys with guns that spout "bang" flags. There are a few nice paths among the rolling hills and quaint little lakes, and everyone enjoys the antics of Vietnamese honeymooners zipping around on motorboats and posing for pictures with guys in fuzzy jumpsuits. Don't miss it.

Phu Dong Thien Vuong St., about 3.2km (2 miles) north of town center. Admission 5,000VND (30¢/20p). Daily 6am–5pm.

Xuan Huong Lake ★★ Once a trickle originating in the Lat village, Dalat's centerpiece, Xuan Huong, was created from a dam project that was finished in 1923, demolished by a storm in 1932, and reconstructed and rebuilt (with heavier stone) in 1935. You can rent windsurfers and swan-shaped paddle boats, although in two visits here I have yet to see anyone actually using them—I cannot vouch for the cleanliness of the water.

Central Dalat.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Dalat is the perfect setting for hiking and mountain biking. Check with the folks at **Phat Tire Ventures** (73 Truong Cong Dinh; ✆ **063/823-104;** see "Visitor Information & Tours," earlier in this section) for remote jungle treks to hill-tribe towns, good mountain biking, or any kind of day trip. This company is extremely amenable and can customize to your needs.

Golfers can try the impressive 18-hole course at the **Dalat Palace Golf Club** (✆ **063/821-201**). One round costs Sofitel Palace or Novotel guests $70 to $80 (£47–£53); all others pay $95 to $105 (£63–£70); prices include caddie fees. Call for reservations. Rental clubs and shoes are available, as are private lessons (by appointment), which begin at $30 (£20) for a half-hour. There is a nice driving range, too.

12 PHAN THIET TOWN & MUI NE BEACH

This is one of the best laid-back getaways in Vietnam. **Phan Thiet** is a bustling little fishing port, quite picturesque and good for a day's visit. It's famous for a brand of fish sauce *(nuoc mam)* made here. The town, and especially the market, is worth exploring, but you'll definitely want to get out to the long stretch of beach to the east: the sprawling sandy shore at **Mui Ne.** This is a popular weekend escape from nearby Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and development in recent years has been rapid. There are some very nice upscale resorts and comfy little boutique bungalow properties here.

The Nick Faldo–designed golf course at the Novotel in Phan Thiet is a big draw, and the consistent winds of Mui Ne bay bring kite- and windsurfers from all over the world. Farther east and north along the coast are vast sand dunes, like a beachside Sahara, and inland is the famous and strangely verdant **Lotus Lake** amid the towering, shifting sands—a good day trip. These spots, as well as other small fishing villages and some local Cham ruins, make for great day trips.

GETTING THERE

Phan Thiet is just 3 to 4 hours by bus or car from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The tourist-cafe buses connect here from Nha Trang and Dalat as well as Saigon, and **Sinh Café** covers all the bases from its new **Mui Ne Resort** (144 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St., Ham Tien, Mui Ne; ✆ **062/847-542;** www.sinhcafevn.com). Another option is **TM Brothers,** with an office at Km 10, Nguyen Dinh Chieu St. (✆ **062/374-1166**). Any hotel front desk can make the necessary arrangements for car rental or bus tickets.

WHERE TO STAY

The Novotel is the only international standard hotel in Phan Thiet proper. Along the beach at Mui Ne, about 9km (5 1/2 miles) to the east, you'll find a growing clutch of luxury resorts in every price range. Ask to see the hotel's beach before you commit to a place; not all are created equal. ***Note:*** Addresses are listed by their distance from Phan Thiet.

Expensive

Novotel Ocean Dunes & Golf Resort ★ "Fore!" Sandwiched between Nick Faldo's golf course and an open lawn and sandy beach, the Novotel is a popular choice for both golfers and Saigon expats on holiday. It's got all the amenities of a resort, but rooms and facilities are in a "traditional" hotel style, with clean carpets and floral prints. The original hotel is an old Soviet-era resort, thus the concrete-block rooms—comfy, but small and not particularly luxe. Every unit has a balcony, though, and prices vary according to the view of the beach or the golf course. The property is right in the town of Phan Thiet, but it's insulated by the surrounding golf course and far from any road (so no

Tips Internet Access

You can find Internet access at most resorts at inflated prices, or check out **Coco Café** (Km 13.5; ✆ **062/847-729**), the only reasonably priced and efficient place going.

honking). Unfortunately, it's about 9km (5½ miles) to the popular beaches of Mui Ne. The beach here is narrow and rocky, but the pool area is expansive and great for kids (there's even a jungle gym). The hotel has lots of activities and rents jet skis and sailboats as well.

1 Ton Duc Than St., Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/822-393.** Fax 062/825-682. www.novotel.com. 135 units. From $105 (£70) golf/sea view double; from $150 (£100) villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (indoor/outdoor seating); 2 bars; 2 pools; golf course; 2 tennis courts; health club; watersports equipment rental; children's club and playground; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Victoria Phan Thiet Beach Resort & Spa ★★ Just as the road descends from Phan Thiet to meet the sandy beaches of Mui Ne, the Victoria stands on a quiet knoll overlooking the sea. The grass-and-garden property is traced by small brick paths leading to upscale bungalows. The layout is unique, with catwalks connecting the main buildings, most made of rough stone. The overall atmosphere is laid-back, private, and very family friendly. Two different pool areas are great places to while away the day, or you can pamper yourself at the massage facility in a seaside grove. Guest rooms are large, private bungalows, some with two tiers and all done in terra cotta and dark wood; the decor is refined comfort with nice touches, such as stylish indirect lighting disguised as pottery, private outdoor showers, and local artwork. Family bungalows have multiple sleeping areas and pullout couches. The newer rooms, farther from the beach, are double-height and quite spacious. The beach is rocky, but the resort overlooks its own quiet cove and has beachside thatch awnings. Come for the weekend and you'll want to stay for the week.

Km 9, Phu Hai, Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/813-000.** Fax 062/813-007. www.victoriahotels-asia.com. 59 units. $180–$270 (£120–£180) bungalow; $370–$680 (£245–£453) villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (indoor/outdoor dining); large thatch-roofed poolside bar areas; outdoor pool w/Jacuzzi; tennis court; small health club; all rentals available; children's club; private tours available; shopping; massage; babysitting; laundry service; billiards room; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Moderate

Coco Beach Resort ★★ Kids Here's that little slice of heaven you've been looking for in your hard travels along the coast. On the main strip in Mui Ne, Coco Beach doesn't look like much from the road—just a wall to keep out the noise—but it is a real seaside oasis. It was the first to build along the strip here, and it's still the best. Rooms are wooden bungalows on stilts, each with a comfy balcony, vaulted ceiling, thatch roof, and mosquito net. They're intimate and tidy, offering an authentic rustic luxury (plus maintenance here is tops—no musty smells). Bathrooms are small but clean, with glass shower stalls. Prices vary depending on proximity to the beautiful beach, where you'll find private lounge chairs and umbrellas. Service is attentive and genuine, the best along the main strip of Mui Ne. The resort's two restaurants, the seaside Paradise Beach Club and the more upscale Champa, are the best in town (see "Where to Dine," below). The quiet garden is a good place to just relax after a day of swimming or boating. There's even an open-air massage facility at the center.

Km 12.5 Ham Tien, Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/847-111.** Fax 062/847-115. 31 units. $85 (£57) bungalow; $170 (£113) 2-room villa (long-stay rates available). AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; pool/beach bar; outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; motorboat/sailboat rental; children's programs; in-house tour programs; car rental; business center; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; library; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge.

Mui Ne Sailing Club Resort ★ This seaside spot is owned by the same Aussie folks who run the popular Sailing Club in Nha Trang. Accommodations run the gamut from budget units with fans, like American motel rooms, to top-notch seaside bungalows. Ask to see your room before checking in, as some are a bit musty. All units have terra-cotta tile with bamboo matting, cloth hangings, and bamboo floor lamps. There is an American Southwest feel in the artful beveled edges of the plaster walls and in the similarly rounded built-in nightstands. Large bathrooms are nicely appointed in tile and stripped-wood trim; they're separated from the bedroom by hanging cloths, a nice touch. The high-end bungalows are the best choice and worth the upgrade. The pool is small but set in a picturesque courtyard adjoining the open-air colonial-style restaurant. The owners have also added a spa, though no sauna. This is a popular stop for windsurfers and kite surfers—both rentals and lessons are available.

24 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St., Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/3847-440.** Fax 062/3847-441. www.sailingclubvietnam.com. 29 units. $77 (£51) double room; $105–$143 (£70–£95) bungalow, depending on view. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa; kiteboarding and watersports rentals available; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; room service; babysitting; laundry service; poolroom; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Pandanus Resort The best of a new clutch of resorts under construction at the foot of the famous Red Sand Dunes north of Phan Thiet, this large property is as self-contained as any in Mui Ne proper, but a bit more remote. The resort is spread out, with ponds and manicured greens; the central pool area is cozy; and the beach is expansive, though dirty and unused. Rooms vary greatly, but all are comfortable, with cool terra-cotta tile offset by dark-wood trim.

Quarter 5, Mui Ne, Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/849-849.** Fax 062/849-850. www.pandanusresort.com. 134 units. $119–$149 (£79–£99) double; $229 (£153) family; $179 (£119) bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; outdoor pool; tennis court; small fitness center; spa; sauna, steam room; tour desk; car rental; free use of bicycles; free shuttle service; business center w/Internet access; limited room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Saigon Mui Ne Resort ★ The Saigon Mui Ne is the most popular spot in town for larger group tours. Run by Saigontourist, the resort has all the amenities, but not a lot of charm. Rooms are comparable to any in this category in town, but there's that hazy indifference of a government-run, tour-group hotel. The good news: the affordable rates and the many amenities. The sprawling property has manicured lawns and tidy bungalows with terra-cotta tile floors, wrought-iron furniture, and bathrooms with granite counters and bamboo lattice work. The hotel-block rooms are spacious, but go for a bungalow with balcony, ideally facing the sea or the pool area. There is talk of a casino soon; heaven help us.

Km 12.3 Ham Tien, Phan Thiet. ✆ **062/847-302.** Fax 062/847-307. www.saigonmuineresort.com. 87 units. $80–$175 (£53–£117) double (bungalow or hotel block); $185–$270 (£123–£180) family room. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; beachside bar; nice courtyard pool; tennis court; Jacuzzi; sauna; all rentals available; Saigontourist tour desk; car rental; salon; room service; massage; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge.

Inexpensive

Budget options line the main drag in Mui Ne. The scene is constantly changing, but expect to pay $8 to $15 (£5.30–£10) for basic guesthouse accommodations. If you come by cafe bus, you'll be taken around to shop for a spot you like. It gets cheaper and more rustic the farther east you go on the main road.

Sinh Café, ever expanding its monopoly of the budget-traveler market in Vietnam (it runs all the buses), has just opened the **Mui Ne Resort** (144 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St., Ham Tien; ✆ **062/847-542;** www.sinhcafevn.com), a 48-room hotel on the farthest end of Mui Ne. If you come by one of its buses, it'll strand you here as long as it can in the hopes that you'll stay. Rooms start at $40 (£27) and aren't a bad bet. There's a pool and all the basics. A festive atmosphere prevails (lots of young partyers).

Another good choice is **Full Moon Beach** (14km/8¾ miles from Phan Thiet, Thon 3–Xa Ham Tien; contact Phuong or Pascal at ✆ **062/847-008;** www.windsurf-vietnam.com). A popular spot for kite surfers and windsurfers, it offers everything from wood perches overlooking the beach to midrange comfort in the newest building. Standard, pool-view rooms are $55 (£37) in the high season, $45 (£30) during low season.

WHERE TO DINE

The **Mui Ne Sailing Club** (24 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St., Ham Tien; ✆ **062/847-440**) serves good, basic Western fare in a nice open-air building at poolside overlooking the ocean. Farther east, **Full Moon Beach** (14km/8¾ miles from Phan Thiet, Thon 3–Xa Ham Tien; ✆ **062/847-008**) is a good stop for coffee or breakfast on your way to Lotus Lake or the big dunes north of town.

Thatched-roof eateries line the main beachside road in Mui Ne. **Luna d' Autuno** (Km 12 Ham Tien; ✆ **062/847-591**), a popular Saigon pizzeria, has a cool new restaurant under a high thatched roof. **Good Morning Vietnam Restaurant** (Km 11.8 Ham Tien; ✆ **062/847-585**), a branch of Vietnam's pizza and pasta franchise, serves affordable, familiar meals. The **Hot Rock** (Km 12.5, across from Bien Xanh Resort; ✆ **062/847-608**) is a good late-night hangout where you can get basic Western fare such as fresh, grilled seafood.

Paradise Beach Club ★ SEAFOOD Set in a soothing seaside pavilion at the popular Coco Beach Resort (see "Where to Stay," above), the Paradise Beach Club is the place for fine fresh seafood and barbecue. Choose from a raw bar and have it cooked to order. The menu covers everything from light snacks and sandwiches to hearty Western meals. For dessert, check out the unique sundaes.The resort's more upscale restaurant, **Champa,** is also a great choice, but only for dinner.

At the Coco Beach Resort, Km 12.5, Ham Tien. ✆ **062/847-111.** Main courses 40,000VND–125,000VND ($2.25–$7.05/£1.50–£4.70). MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm and 6:30–10pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

At **Cape Mui Ne** ★★, some 20km (13 miles) northeast of town, you'll find Mui Ne's sprawling sand dunes. A trip out this way brings you through lots of quaint seaside villages that are worth a look. Coming from Mui Ne Beach, you'll first reach a small fishing town with a fine little rural market—great in the early morning. Heading inland away from the beach, you'll come to the towering **Red Dunes** ★★. A walk to the top offers views of the town and surrounding countryside; you're sure to be followed by a gaggle of friendly kids trying to sell you on the idea of renting one of their plastic sleds for the ride down the steep dune slopes—kind of fun. From the Red Dunes, if you have time, take a long and bumpy ride to unique **Lotus Lake** ★★. The views of the coast are dynamic, and this unique verdant lake in the parched silver dune makes the trip worth it. It's a long day, though. Ask at any hotel for tour arrangements. Expect to pay $14 (£9.30) per person for two or more to go to the tip of the cape and the Red Dunes, more to go inland.

At the highest point on the road between Phan Thiet Town and Mui Ne Beach, you won't miss **Cham Tower,** an impressive spire of crumbling brick. The tower dates from the end of the 13th century and is worth a stop if you weren't able to catch any of the Cham sites near Hoi An and Danang. Any taxi will be happy to make a brief stop on the way. There are also Cham sites some 2 hours' drive inland near Phan Rang; all hotels can arrange tours.

Phan Thiet Market ★ is a large but pretty standard central market in town. This is where you can pick up a bottle of locally made *nuoc mam* (fish sauce). Go early for the bringing in of the day's catch, and don't forget your camera.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

The wind conditions in Mui Ne are steady and strong in the dry season (Oct–May), and the beach is becoming a real kite-surfing and windsurfing mecca (it's over 12-knot winds for two-thirds of the year). **Jibe's** (Km 14, Ham Tien, Mui Ne; ✆ **062/847-405;** www.windsurf-vietnam.com), a popular rental shop, windsurfer club, and bar, is a good place to check in or rent a board. It's also a great opportunity for first-time kite surfers: A 1-hour private lesson with an IKO-certified instructor, including gear, starts at just $55 (£37). The focus is on safety, of course, and the savings are significant here (similar lessons elsewhere cost a mint).

Sailors will want to contact the folks at the **Mui Ne Sailing Club** (24 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St., Ham Tien, Phan Thiet; ✆ **062/847-440**), or at any hotel or resort, about renting Hobie Cat and Laser sailboats, Windsurfers, jet skis, and runabouts.

Finally, the outstanding Nick Faldo–designed **Ocean Dunes Golf Course** (1 Ton Duc Than St., Phan Thiet; ✆ **062/823-366**) is a big draw here in town.

13 HO CHI MINH CITY (SAIGON) ★★

Ho Chi Minh City—or Saigon, as it is once again commonly known—is a relatively young Asian city, founded in the 18th century. Settled mainly by civil-war refugees from northern Vietnam as well as Chinese merchants, it quickly became a major commercial center. When the French took over the country they called Cochin China, Saigon became the capital. After the French left in 1954, Saigon remained the capital of South Vietnam until national reunification in 1975.

Saigon is still Vietnam's commercial headquarters, brash and busy, with a keen sense of its own importance. Located on the Saigon River, it's Vietnam's major port and largest city, with a population of almost seven million people. True to its reputation, the city is noisy, crowded, and dirty, but the central business district is rapidly developing in steel-and-glass precision to rival any metropolis on the globe. Still, the old Saigon survives in wide downtown avenues flanked by pristine colonials. Hectic and eclectic, this place has an attitude all its own.

Some of Saigon's tourism highlights include the **Vietnam History Museum;** the grisly **War Remnants Museum;** and **Cholon,** the Chinese district, with its pagodas and exotic stores. **Dong Khoi Street**—formerly fashionable Rue Catinat during the French era and Tu Do, or Freedom Street, during the American war—is still lined with grand colonial hotels, chic shops, and cafes. The food in Saigon is some of the best Vietnam has to offer, the nightlife sparkles, and the shopping is good. The city is also a logical jumping-off point for excursions to other southern destinations: the Mekong Delta (p. 385), the Cu Chi Tunnels (p. 385), and Phan Thiet Town and Mui Ne Beach (see previous section).

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Most regional airlines connect with Ho Chi Minh, including Malaysian Airlines, Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, Silk Air/Singapore Airlines, Lao Airlines, Garuda Indonesia, Philippine Airlines, United Airlines, and Cathay Pacific. **Vietnam Airlines** usually has the best fares, thanks to government controls; to confirm or book flights, you can call its local office at 116 Nguyen Hue, District 1 (✆ **08/3832-0320;** fax 08/3848-6945). If you're flying to Vietnam directly from North America, check with **United Airlines** and **Cathay Pacific** for good fares and itineraries. Domestically, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is linked by Vietnam Airlines flights from Hanoi, Hue, Danang, Hoi An, Nha Trang, and Dalat.

At the **Tan Son Nhat International Airport,** you can change foreign currency for VND, but taxi drivers to town won't mind payment in U.S. dollars, either. Arranging a hotel limousine to greet you will certainly make life a bit easier, but taxis are plentiful outside the arrivals hall. The trip to town is $5 (£3.30). To get to the airport, if you can't find a cab on the street, call **Airport Taxi** (✆ **08/3844-6666**).

BY BUS/MINIVAN By bus, Saigon is about 5½ hours from Dalat, the nearest major city. All of the cafe buses connect here, of course, and line the streets around the Pham Ngu Lao area. See "Visitor Information & Tours," below.

BY CAR For safety reasons alone, if you're taking wheels, it is better to book a minivan with a tour or group.

GETTING AROUND

Saigon is divided into districts, as is Hanoi, and is very easy to navigate. Be sure to know the district along with the address of your destination, and try to group your sightseeing accordingly (avoid crisscrossing districts in a day). Most of the hotels, bars, shops, and restaurants are in District 1, easily covered on foot, while sightseeing attractions are spread among Districts 1, 3, and 5 (Cholon).

BY TAXI Taxis are clustered around the bigger hotels and restaurants. They cost 15,000VND (85¢/55p) to start and 11,000VND (60¢/40p) or so for every kilometer thereafter. If you need to call ahead, try **Airport Taxi** (✆ **08/3844-6666**) or **Mai Linh** (✆ **08/3826-2626**).

BY CAR You can simplify your sightseeing efforts if you hire a car and driver for the day from **Ann Tours** or **Saigontourist** (see "Visitor Information & Tours," below).

BY MOTORBIKE/BICYCLE Saigon is cursed with the country's most chaotic traffic, so you might want to think twice before renting a motorbike or bicycle, which aren't as easily available as in other towns. You can, however, hop a **motorcycle taxi**—a quick trip is 10,000VND (55¢/35p), while hourly booking can be in the ballpark of 15,000VND (85¢/55p) with some haggling. It's a bit hair-raising sometimes, but a good way to get around.

BY CYCLO Cyclos are available for an hourly rental of about 20,000VND ($1.10/75p), but they simply are not a good option in Saigon, especially outside District 1. First, drivers have an odd habit of not speaking English (or indeed, any other language) halfway through your trip and taking you to places you never asked to see, or driving around in circles pretending to be confused. Second, riding in a slow, open conveyance amid thousands of motorbikes and cars is unpleasant and dangerous—plus cyclo passengers are low to the ground and in the front, functioning something like a bumper. Third, drive-by thefts from riders are common even during daylight hours.

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Bong Sen Hotel Annex **20**
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Kimdo Royal City Hotel **31**
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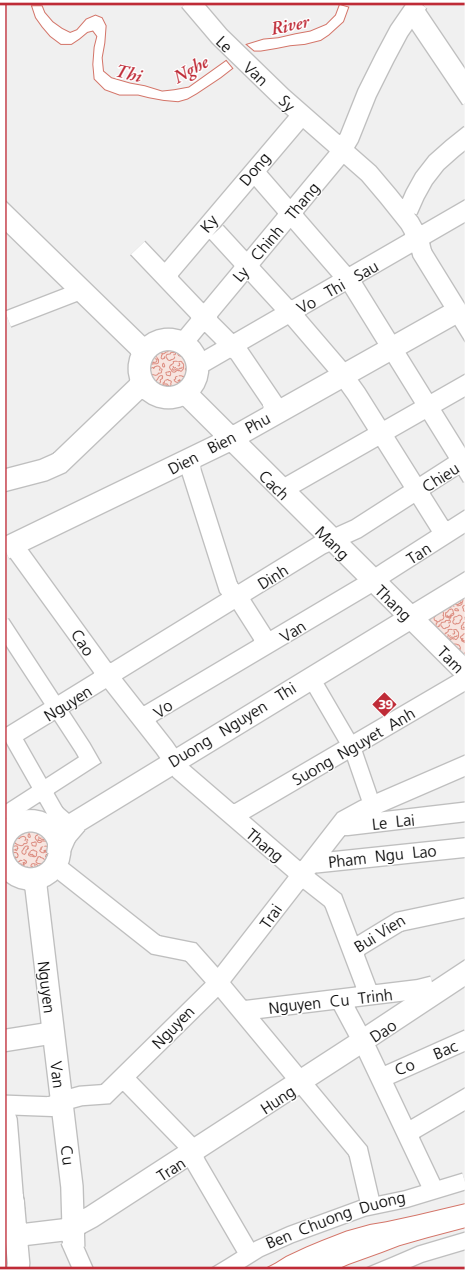

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La Van Tam Park
Saigon River
Ben River
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Tran Quoc Toan
Lo Hai
Vo Thi Sau
Phu Dinh Thu
Van Tien Chieu
Nguyen Tien Hoang
Bien Dinh Ba
Le Dien Ky Pasteur
Hoang Khai
Minh Duan
Nguyen Binh Khiem
Tran Qui Khoi
Quoc Nguyen Tan
Van Thao Don
Vo Nguyen Nghia
Thi Le
Nguyen Trung Ngan
Du
Trung
Ly Tu Trong
Thanh Tong
Loi Thai Van Lung
Thang
Le
Nguyen
Duc
Nguyen Hue
Pasteur
Trung
Le Lai
Pham Ngu Lao
Ham Nghi
Bui Vien
Tran Hung Dao
Ng Nguyen Thai Binh
Nguyen Cong Tru
Duong
Co Bac
Co Giang
Thai Hoc
Chuong
Don
Ben Van
Ben
Ng Truong To
Doan Nhu Hai
Le Quoc Hung
Doan Hoang Van
Nguyen Tat Thanh
Dieu
Bo Ton Dan
CHINA
Hanoi
Gulf of Tonkin
LAOS
South China Sea
THAILAND
VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)
Gulf of Thailand
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Every major tourist agency has its headquarters or a branch in Saigon. All will be able to book tours and travel throughout the city and the southern region, and usually the countryside as well.

- **Ann Tours** (58 Ton That Tung St., District 1; ✆ **08/3833-2564;** fax 08/3832-3866; www.anntours.com) has a great reputation that is well deserved. It specializes in custom tours for individuals and small groups. It can be relatively expensive, but that's compared to the seat-in-coach cattle-drive tours. These guys will help you with virtually anything you want to do in Vietnam. Ask for director Tony Nong, and tell him Frommer's sent you.
- **Exotissimo Travel** (Saigon Trade Center, 37 Ton Duc Than, District 1; ✆ **08/3825-1723;** fax 08/3825-1684; www.exotissimo.com) has a chic downtown office and can arrange just about any tour or international itinerary. It's popular with expats and has convenient offices throughout the region.
- **Saigontourist** (49 Le Thanh Ton St., District 1; ✆ **08/3824-4554;** fax 08/3822-4987; www.saigontourist.net) is a large government-run group, but it'll get you where you want to go and is a far better choice than the budget cafes (see below). It maintains desks in the Majestic, Rex, and Sheraton hotels.

Budget Tours

- **Sinh Café** (246–248 De Tham St., District 1; ✆ **08/3836-7338** or 08/3837-6833; info@sinhcafevn.com) is a backpacker's choice for inexpensive travel and tours. On paper, the tours seem exactly the same as others offered through private tour agents, but the price tags are cheaper.
- **TNK** (216 De Tham St., District 1; ✆ **08/3837-8276;** www.tnktravelvietnam.com) is just another of the many options.

Fast Facts Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

American Express Amex is represented in Saigon by **Exotissimo Travel** (Saigon Trade Center, 37 Ton Duc Thang St.; ✆ **08/3825-1723**). ***Be warned:*** It does not provide complete travel services, but can direct you if you lose your card. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm.

Currency Exchange You can change money in banks, hotels, and jewelry stores. The exchange rate in Saigon is better than in many smaller cities. There's a convenient currency-exchange storefront at 4C Le Loi St., right in the town center—a good spot for the right rates on traveler's checks.

Major banks include: **ANZ Bank,** 11 Me Linh Sq., District 1 (✆ **08/3829-9319**); **Citibank,** 115 Nguyen Hue St., District 1 (✆ **08/3824-2118**); **HSBC,** 75 Pham Hong Thai St., District 1 (✆ **08/3829-2288**); and **Vietcombank,** 29 Ben Chuong Duong, District 1 (✆ **08/3829-7245**). ANZ Bank, Citibank, and HSBC all have **ATMs** dispensing dollars and VND around the clock, though **ANZ** is the only one that doesn't have extra service charges on top of your withdrawal.

Embassies & Consulates For embassies, see "Fast Facts: Vietnam," p. 277. Consulates are all in District 1, as follows: **U.S.,** 4 Le Duan St. (✆ **08/3822-9433**); **Canada,** 10th floor, 235 Dong Khoi St. (✆ **08/3827-9899**); **Australia,** 5B Ton Duc Thang

St. (✆ **08/3829-6035**); **New Zealand,** 9th floor, 235 Dong Khoi St. (✆ **08/3822-6908**); and **U.K.,** 25 Le Duan St. (✆ **08/3829-8433**).

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **113;** for fire, dial ✆ **114;** and for an ambulance, dial ✆ **115.** Have a translator on hand, if necessary; operators don't speak English.

Internet Access Almost every upscale hotel provides Internet services, but you can bet they charge a pretty penny. You won't find any service on Dong Khoi, but a short walk in any direction brings you to storefronts that charge an average of 200VND (5¢/5p) per minute. Service in the Pham Ngu Lao backpacker area is fast and cheap; Internet cafes line De Tham and charge 5,000VND per hour (30¢/20p per minute).

Mail The main post office is at 2 Coq Xu Paris, District 1 (✆ **08/3823-2541** or 08/3823-2542), just across from Notre Dame Cathedral. It's open daily from 6:30am to 10pm. All services are available here, including long-distance calling and call-back. The building itself is a historic landmark (see "What to See & Do," later). Postal service is also available in most hotels and at various locations throughout the city.

Safety The biggest threat to your health in Saigon is likely to be the traffic. Cross the wildly busy streets at a slow, steady pace. If you're having a really hard time getting across, find a local who is crossing and stick to his heels.

Pickpocketing is a big problem, especially the motorbike drive-bys in which someone slashes the shoulder strap of your bag and drives off. Keep your bag close and away from traffic. Hang on to your wallet, don't wear flashy jewelry, and be especially wary in crowded places like markets. Women should avoid wandering around alone past 11pm or so. Contact your consulate or hotel if you have a serious problem. If you insist on going to the local police, bring a translator. Know that the Saigon police tend to throw up their hands at "minor" infractions such as purse snatching or thievery.

Telephones The city code for Saigon is **8.** ***Note:*** The city has started increasing telephone numbers from seven to eight digits. Not everyone is on the new system yet. If the number you call does not work, add "3" between the city code and the phone number, for example if "08/123-4567" is out of service, try "08/3123-4567."

WHERE TO STAY

Saigon has the best variety of accommodations in Vietnam, from deluxe business and family hotels to spotless smaller options. Most hotels are clustered around Nguyen Hue Street in District 1, as are the restaurants, shops, and bars.

Remember that prices listed here are the "rack rates" and should be considered only a guideline. Internet, group, and standard promotional rates are the rule. Especially in the off season (Mar–Sept), expect discounts of up to 50%. Note that many hotels levy a VAT of up to 20%.

Very Expensive

Caravelle Hotel ★★ Named for a type of light, fast ship, this sleek downtown hotel gives you that very impression. A French company built the original in 1956 and, after honeymoon years as the town's address of note, the place became a shabby hangout for

wartime journalists and then fell into obscurity as the Doc Lap (Independence) Hotel in postwar years. In 1998, the Caravelle was renovated beyond recognition and is now an extremely attractive, efficient, and well-appointed hotel. Business travelers and well-heeled tourists enjoy the plush rooms, with neutral furnishings, and marble bathrooms; higher floors have great views. In 2008, the hotel underwent a complete overhaul again. The best addition: Incredibly comfortable Posturepedic mattresses and 400-thread count linen. This one of the best places to catch a proper night's sleep. The classic character of the old hotel lives on in the rooftop Saigon Saigon bar, an open-air colonial throwback with rattan shades, low-slung chairs, and twirling ceiling fans. If you let your imagination go, you might just see Graham Greene sidling up to the bar.

19 Lam Son Sq., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3823-4999.** Fax 08/3824-3999. www.caravellehotel.com. 335 units. $270–$390 (£180–£260) double; suites from $420 (£280). AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; lovely rooftop pool; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; all rentals available; tour desk; expensive but extensive business center; salon w/facials and manicures; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms; small casino; rooms for those w/limited mobility. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Hotel Majestic ★ This 1925 landmark, on the riverside corner of Dong Khoi Street (formerly Rue Catinat), still has some historical charm despite many renovations—and it's a real picture-postcard colonial from the outside. Owned by Saigontourist, the Majestic is always full, as it's a good, affordable, atmospheric choice. Botched details abound on the inside, however, like tacky decor, but the rooms and facilities are still classy and comfortable for the price. High ceilings, original wood floors, and retro fixtures are a nice touch. Bathrooms are large, with tubs and old-style taps. The small courtyard pool area is lined with picturesque shuttered windows and walkways; in fact, the best choices are the deluxe rooms facing this quiet spot. Suites are just larger versions of deluxe rooms, while standards are small and quite basic. Buffet meals at the fine restaurant, Cyclo, are accompanied by either piano or traditional music and sometimes dance. The staff has a genuine desire to make your stay memorable, whether that means explaining the eccentricities of Vietnamese cuisine or hailing you a taxi. Don't miss the great views from the rooftop bar, a good spot to have a chat and popular for weddings and parties.

1 Dong Khoi St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-5517.** Fax 08/3829-5510. www.majesticsaigon.com.vn. 175 units. $219–$309 (£146–£206) double; $379–$659 (£253–£439) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; small courtyard pool; basic health club; spa; sauna; Saigontourist tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/HBO, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Mövenpick Saigon Hotel ★ This hotel will be a gem once renovations are completed in September 2009. Swiss hotelier Mövenpick recently took over management of this former CIA and U.S. Army quarters and is responsible for the much-needed face-lift. The university dorm feel of current rooms will be replaced with sleek new furniture, flatscreen TVs, bathrooms fitted with marble counter tops, rain-shower heads, and glass partitions to lend the room a spacious feel. The lobby will retain its colonial flavor and Art Deco details. Popular Irish pub Mulligan's is still around, and the fitness center will be relocated to the rooftop. One sweet treat: Turn downs in the club room come with a mini Toblerone chocolate. The drawback—it's 10 minutes from the airport, but you're in District 3 and some 15 minutes from town. For now, most taxi drivers still know the hotel by it's old name: Omni.

253 Nguyen Van Troi St., Phu Nhuan District (District 3), Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3844-9222.** Fax 08/3844-9198. www.moevenpick-saigon.com. 267 units. $230 (£153) superior; $255 (£170) deluxe;

$290–$730 (£193–£487) executive deluxe rooms. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; rooftop pool; health club; brand-new Qi spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam room; tour desk; car rental; business center w/ Internet access; shopping; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; book-borrowing corner; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

New World Hotel Saigon ★★ President Clinton called this first-rate hotel home during his brief stay in Saigon; it's a fine choice, indeed, whether you're a business traveler, tourist, or world leader. The location is in the very center of town, a short walk from Ben Thanh Market (p. 379). A popular park is right out front, and there's a nice bustle and feeling of connectedness to the place that's rarely found at the self-contained luxury hotels. The impeccable rooms are done in a soothing array of neutrals, while the bathrooms are a sharp contrast in black-and-gray marble. The fat pillows are a little mushy and the beds are a bit too firm, but you can't have everything. The executive floors have a lounge and an impressive list of perks: all-day refreshments, free pressing, computer hookups, and free access to financial newswire information. The staff snaps to; service is ultraefficient. It's also one of the few hotels that asks straight away if you'd like a nonsmoking room.

76 Le Lai St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3822-8888.** Fax 08/3823-0710. www.newworldvietnam.com. 536 units. $209–$258 (£139–£172) double; from $307 (£205) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; lighted tennis court; health club; spa; sauna; all rentals available; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Park Hyatt Saigon ★★★ The brand-new kid on the block, the Park Hyatt manages to capture the old feel of Vietnam while integrating all the modern amenities worthy of a world-class hotel. Lines are clean and elegant, and teak floors and antique glass combine with traditional lacquer to create instant nostalgia. The rooms, which feel like a Vietnamese residence, are spacious and well appointed; some have verandas that open directly onto the pool. Modern features include soundproof windows and 25-inch flatscreen TVs. That outdoor pool—with midstream jets to massage you while you swim—and the accompanying landscaped green space give the place a resort feel. On-site restaurants include Square One, which serves seafood and Vietnamese along with grilled steaks, and Opera, which is strictly Italian down to its exclusively Italian wine list. The Park Hyatt lacks a wartime or French colonial history, so any nostalgia you may feel here is carefully designed. That said, the hotel is becoming the hot spot for international jetsetters (the private driveway and back entrance help). Still, you don't have to be the biggest superstar in the world to find the Park Hyatt a good choice for a luxury stay in the center of Saigon.

2 Lam Son Sq., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3824-1234.** Fax 08/3823-7569. www.saigon.park.hyatt.com. 252 units. $290–$500 (£193–£333) double; $590–$2,500 (£393–£1,667) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar/lounge; outdoor pool; best health club in town; spa; Jacuzzi; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms; cooking classes; rooms for those w/limited mobility. *In room:* A/C, 40-in. flatscreen satellite TV, high-speed Internet access, minibar, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Renaissance Riverside Hotel Saigon ★ Managed by Marriott, the Renaissance Riverside is a convenient downtown address. The lobby is done in a colonial theme with a grand spiral staircase connecting to the mezzanine. Rooms have black-and-white tile entries, tidy carpeting, and light furnishings done in cool pastels. Electronic control panels near the headboard might remind you of a 1970s bachelor pad. Bathrooms have black-marble counters. You could be anywhere, really—everything's nice in the same way

an upscale hotel might look in Bangkok, Paris, or Pittsburgh; nevertheless, the amenities, such as the small rooftop pool and health club, are good. The Riverside is a popular business hotel, which means smoking everywhere: All public spaces are a bit musty, even on designated nonsmoking floors. If you want a nonsmoking room, ask to see it before checking in. Don't miss the dim sum lunch at the fine Cantonese restaurant, Kabin.

8–15 Ton Duc Thang St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. **08/3822-0033.** Fax 08/3823-5666. www.renaissancehotels.com/sgnbr. 319 units. $220–$295 (£147–£197) double; from $400 (£267) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; cafe; bar; rooftop pool w/great city view; health club; nice massage/spa facility; all rentals available; concierge; business center; shopping; room service; babysitting; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, iron, safe.

Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Towers ★★ The tallest, most expensive, and one of the newest hotels in Ho Chi Minh, the Sheraton is the talk of the town. Everything is done on a grand scale, from colossal meeting rooms and top business facilities to plush guest rooms. It's high-end comfort from a brand that you can bank on. Rooms have it all: flatscreen TVs, broadband Internet, large desks, and great views of town. Bathrooms are huge, with separate shower and tub. Rooms in the new towers feature ultra-contemporary style and comfort. The Sheraton seemingly covers every amenity, from a host of fine-dining options to the spa area (with squash courts and an outdoor pool) to the popular **Level 23** nightspot, which plays host to live bands on the 23rd floor. From the moment your car pulls up out front, you'll know you've arrived: Every guest here is given the red-carpet treatment.

88 Dong Khoi St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3827-2828.** Fax 08/3827-2929. www.sheraton.com/saigon. 483 units. $250 (£142) deluxe; $330–$350 (£220–£230) studio; from $480 (£320) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; steam room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; excellent shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms (w/separate check-in). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Sofitel Plaza Saigon ★★ The Sofitel chain is famous in Southeast Asia for finding grand old colonial dames and converting them into the most charming hotels.This is not one of them. Opened in 1999, the Sofitel Plaza is one of the shiny new towers on the Saigon skyline; what it lacks in colonial charm, however, it more than makes up for in luxury, convenience, and comfort. Accommodations are handsome, with fine Art Deco touches such as the curving, clean-lined desks in most rooms. You'll never lack for any amenity here, and the staff is helpful and professional. In a convenient spot just across from the former U.S. and French embassies, this is a popular choice for the international business crowd and long-stay executives, who enjoy the sleek executive floor with private lounge, buffet, drinks, and business services.

17 Le Duan Blvd., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **800/221-4542** in the U.S., or 08/3824-1555. Fax 08/3824-1666. www.sofitel.com. 290 units. $250 (£167) superior; $310 (£207) club room; $450–$1,800 (£300–£1,200) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; luxury rooftop pool; health club; spa; sauna; steam room; concierge; car rental; business center w/Internet access; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Expensive

Duxton Hotel Saigon ★ Formerly the Prince before becoming part of the popular Australian chain, the Duxton Saigon is efficient, affordable, and stylish (if a bit studied). But given the competition from the nearby Park Hyatt and Caravelle, it is overpriced for what you get. The beige rooms are tasteful, with plush beds and carpeting. The bathrooms

are done in smart black-and-white marble. This place is popular with business travelers, especially those on an extended stay, who come here for all the comforts of home. The staff is efficient and personable. The spa offers excellent Hong Kong massages (ask about special midweek spa rates).

63 Nguyen Hue Blvd., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3822-2999.** Fax 083/824-1888. www.duxton.com. 203 units. $265–$315 (£177–£210) deluxe double; $415–$515 (£277–£343) suite. Promotional and long-stay rates available. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; nightclub; small outdoor pool; small health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Grand Hotel ★★ This 1930s colonial, another owned by Saigontourist, is done just right (well, close, at least). The renovated Grand has a serene atmosphere, with some choice features such as the lovingly restored iron elevator at the center. The Grand is at its best when taking advantage of its long history, thus rooms in the older block are much more charming than the bland, chain-hotel units in the new wing. Deluxe rooms clustered in the old building near the elevator have classic high ceilings, wood floors, and a comfortable colonial charm. All units are big, with simple dark-wood furniture—and without the musty smell that plagues many Saigon hotels. The bathrooms are small, but have plenty of counter space. The lobby is bright, the staff is friendly, and the location on Dong Khoi couldn't be better. The quiet atmosphere suggests leisure rather than business travelers, though, and the hotel boasts all the right amenities, including the central courtyard's small but peaceful pool area, a unique escape from busy Ho Chi Minh City.

8–24 Dong Khoi St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3823-0163.** Fax 063/3823-5781. www.grandhotel.vn. 107 units. $180 (£120) double; $200–$230 (£133–£153) deluxe; $260 (£173) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; nice outdoor courtyard pool; small health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping; salon; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Hotel Continental ★ This hotel is a big shame. It's not that it's so bad really, but it could have been a world-class heritage hotel—instead, it's in shambles, thanks to the shortsightedness of the folks at Saigontourist. Built in 1890, it is the preeminent historic hotel in the city, of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* fame. Located at the very heart of Saigon's downtown, the colonial facade attracts shutter-clicking tourists and admirers, but that's where the love affair ends. Its last renovation was in 1980, which left the lobby gaudy with oversize chandeliers, Chinese vases, and that fake, semigloss shine of a low-end business hotel. Rooms are enormous, with high ceilings, but the red velveteen curtains, tatty red carpets, and general run-down feel spoil the fantasy. It looks more like an aging cathouse, unfortunately, and the furniture can't seem to fill the big, empty spaces. "First-class rooms" have roll-top desks, ornate columns, and a wood archway separating a small sitting area—a good bet. The restaurant is a lovely period piece. The hotel staff is friendly, but more or less dazed and confused. With a renovation, this historic gem could be a contender.

132–134 Dong Khoi St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-9201.** Fax 08/3824-1772. www.continentalvietnam.com. 85 units. $170–$190 (£113–£127) double; from $230 (£153) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; small fitness center; tour desk; car rental; small business center w/Internet access; limited room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/video rental, minibar, fridge.

Norfolk Hotel ★★ This snappy little business hotel has one of the highest occupancy rates in town, and for good reason: It's affordable, it's convenient, and it covers all the bases. Rooms are large and bright, furnished in slightly mismatched chain-hotel style,

but everything is like new. The beds are soft and deluxe, the TVs are large, and the bathrooms are small but finished in marble. The staff is efficient and helpful. The restaurant has extensive breakfast and lunch buffets, as well as monthly themes and special menus. It's perfect for the business traveler or tourist seeking lots of amenities—all at reasonable prices. Book early.

117 Le Thanh Ton St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-5368.** Fax 08/3829-3415. www.norfolkgroup.com. 104 units. $200–$250 (£133–£167) double; $350 (£230) suite. Promotional and Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar/club; exercise room; sauna; steam room; concierge; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Moderate

Huong Sen Hotel Huong Sen is a good hotel for the price and the downtown location, but it's just another of the many government-owned places whose service is marked by varying levels of indifference. The decor is kind of a downer, too. It's a popular choice for big tours, and group and Internet rates are usually available. Rooms are big and newly renovated, with simple, colorfully painted wood furniture, ultracomfortable beds, and floral drapes. Nice touches include molded ceilings and marble-topped counters in the spotless bathrooms. Some units have balconies. The hotel is comparable to any other in this category, but quite bland.

66–70 Dong Khoi St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-1415.** Fax 08/3829-0916. www.vietnamtourism.com/huongsen. 76 units. $99–$149 (£66–£99) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; exercise room; sauna; steam room; car rental; business center w/Internet access; limited room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge.

Kimdo Royal City Hotel ★★ This is a good, basic bargain right downtown. The Kimdo is the kind of place with a wooden tree-trunk clock in the lobby, Greek statues outside, and shiny polyester bedspreads. The rooftop massage area has electric blinking stars on the ceiling and a hot tub surrounded by plaster reliefs of sea nymphs. The original hotel was built nearly 100 years ago and underwent a renovation in 1994, so everything is still in good shape. All rooms are quite large and have interesting Asian carved furniture, tidy carpets, and rock-hard beds (you can request a softer one). Bathrooms are clean but basic, with no counter space.

133 Nguyen Hue Ave., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3822-5914** or 08/3822-5915. Fax 08/3822-5913. www.kimdohotel.com. 135 units. $189–$279 (£126–£186) double; $379–$439 (£253–£293). Great Internet discounts available. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Rooftop restaurant; steam bath; car rentals available; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Internet access, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Palace Hotel ★★ This hotel is a standout for its location and price. The Palace has been around for a while. In fact, it was popular with U.S. soldiers on R & R during the war years. Avoid the 40-odd rooms that haven't yet been treated to the swanky, Art Deco–style renovation of the past 2 years (renovated rooms are dubbed "Signature"). The upgrade from "Signature Superior" to "Signature Deluxe" is well worth it—the cheaper room has only one tiny window that makes it feel somewhat cave-like, while the deluxe comes with a great street view and a small balcony. Tall travelers beware: Beds are very low to the ground. Staff here is ultrafriendly.

56–66 Nguyen Hue Blvd., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-2860.** Fax 08/3824-4230. www.palacesaigon.com. 144 units. Old rooms $95–$140 (£63–£79) double/suite. New rooms $145–$175 (£97–£117)

double; $195–$220 (£130–£147) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; night club; rooftop pool; car rental; business center w/Internet access; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, free Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe.

Rex Hotel ★ The Rex has an unorthodox history; it used to be a French garage, was expanded by the Vietnamese, and then was used by the United States Information Agency (and some say the CIA) from 1962 to 1970. The hotel was transformed in a massive renovation and opened in 1990 as the hugely atmospheric government-run place it is today. There are a variety of rooms, but all are large and clean, with fluffy carpets and bamboo detailing on the ceilings, the mirrors—everywhere, in fact. The lampshades are big royal crowns, which are a hoot. The beds and pillows are firm but fat, and there are good views from some balconies. The Rex has a fabulous location downtown, across from a square that has a lively carnival atmosphere at night. It is also known for its rooftop bar, with its panoramic Saigon view. At time of writing, the hotel was in the process of adding a new wing. If the shopping arcade on the completed first floor (stand-alone shops from Marc Jacobs, Chloe, and Balenciaga) is any indication, the rooms should be super luxe. A large outdoor pool is also in the renovation plans.

141 Nguyen Hue Blvd., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-2185** or 08/3829-3115. Fax 08/3829-6536. www.rexhotelvietnam.com. 207 units. $150–$170 (£100–£113) double; $200–$220 (£133–£147) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; tennis court; small health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; salon; room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, safe, fax machine.

Inexpensive

If you're on a tight budget, head for **De Tham,** a backpacker haven loaded with guesthouses and minihotels; a fan-cooled room with a cold-water shower goes for as little as $5 (£3.30) per night, or an air-conditioned room with hot water for around $15 (£10). Most of these places are very basic (and a bit noisy from street traffic) but tidy, well run, and friendly.

Bong Sen Hotel Annex This small annex to the large Saigontourist-owned Bong Sen provides many of the same amenities at a lower price. Rooms are very basic but tidy, with light-wood furniture, thin carpet, and blue-tile bathrooms. Everything is on the small side, though, and the economy rooms have only one small window (even a junior suite isn't much bigger). Make sure you're getting the Annex and not the main Bong Sen, which, though recently renovated, isn't much of a value. Service is indifferent, but this is a good place to just lay your head for cheap. You can arrange any travel necessities elsewhere.

61–63 Hai Ba Trung St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3823-5818.** Fax 08/3823-5816. www.bongsenhotel2.com. 57 units. $69–$79 (£46–£53) double; $65 (£43) junior suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; rentals available; tour desk; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Hong Hoa Hotel ★★ This minihotel is the top dog of the lower-end category in the Pham Ngu Lao backpacker area. Rooms are small but tidy, with real wood furniture and tile floors. It's backpacker basics here—low foam beds and little charm—but the satellite TV and IDD phones are a real luxury in this price range. It's a funny spot: If it looks like two addresses, it is, with one entrance through a small grocery storefront on busy De Tham and the other off Pham Ngu Lao. The hotel is cozy, safe, and friendly, and if you stay long enough, you'll be adopted (and certainly learn some Vietnamese). If the place is full, which is more often than not the case, ask for a recommendation, and they'll point you to a good neighbor.

185/28 Pham Ngu Lao St., 250 De Tham St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3836-1915.** www.hong hoavn.com. 7 units. $17–$25 (£11–£17) double. Rates include tax and service charge. MC, V. **Amenities:** Rentals available; tour information; small grocery; laundry service; popular Internet center (free access for guests). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV.

Que Huong–Liberty 3 Hotel As the name suggests, the Liberty 3 is part of a chain. No. 3 is right in the heart of the Pham Ngu Lao backpacker area and arguably the best choice down that way. Rooms have all the amenities of a proper hotel, but are priced just above the average minihotel. It has thin office carpets and bland decor throughout, but everything is clean. Standard rooms are a bit too small; a superior is your best bet. Be sure to ask for a window and take a peek at the room before checking in, as some are worse than others (and many are musty from smokers). The adjoining **Allez Boo Bar & Restaurant** is an old backpacker standby and now managed by the hotel. The chain's flagship hotel, the **Metropole** (148 Tran Hung Dao; ✆ **08/920-1937**), is a popular business address.

187 Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3836-9522.** Fax 08/3836-4557. www.libertyhotels.com.vn. 60 units. $75–$89 (£50–£59) double; $110 (£73) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Riverside Hotel ★ Wedged into an old colonial storefront area between the hulking Renaissance Riverside and the wedding-cake Majestic, the Riverside is a good little budget stop. It's popular with young Japanese visitors, thus most services cater to them (tours and shopping). Public spaces are a bit banged and battered (worn carpets all around), but private spaces are clean and expansive for the price. It's an old building, so some rooms conform to the angled footprint in unique ways. Bathrooms are huge, plain affairs with no counter space, but again, they're tidy. Deluxe units are worth the upgrade; they're much larger and have better amenities such as in-room safes. The leopard-pattern synthetic blankets are kind of fun. The staff is quite helpful.

18–20 Ton Duc Thang St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3822-4038.** Fax 08/3825-1417. www.marriott.com. 50 units. $59–$99 (£39–£66) double; from $139 (£93) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; business center; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer.

Spring Hotel (Mua Xuan) ★★ If you don't care about fancy amenities and want to be downtown, look no further than the Spring, with nicer rooms than those at many hotels twice the price. Accommodations are neat and clean, with comfy beds, big TVs, and solid dark-wood or rattan furniture. The floral motif isn't bad, and the carpeted floors are impeccably clean. The lowest-priced "economy" rooms have no windows. Suites are large, with couches in separate sitting rooms. Go as high up as you can to escape street noise, which is the hotel's one failing (the elevator's kind of slow, too). The Spring has an unsettling Greco-Roman motif, with statues and filigree here and there; if the lobby's hanging ivy, colonnades, and grand staircase are a bit over the top, the rooms are a bit more toned down and utilitarian. A short walk from Dong Khoi and the central business district, this is a popular choice for long-term business travelers. The staff couldn't be nicer or more helpful.

44–46 Le Thanh Ton St., District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. ✆ **08/3829-7362.** Fax 08/3822-1383. 45 units. $52–$73 (£35–£49) double; $91 (£61) suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; rentals and tours can be arranged; room service (7am–10pm); laundry service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, wooden safe.

WHERE TO DINE

Saigon has the largest array of restaurants in Vietnam, with virtually every world cuisine represented. The area around **Dong Khoi** has lots of fine-dining choices, the newest

being **On the 6,** 6 Dong Khoi St. (✆ **08/3823-8866**), a new spot by Chef Didier Corlou of La Verticale (p. 289) fame and formerly of Le Beaulieu. Ask locals where to eat, though, and they'll point you to the **Ben Thanh Market** or a local vendor on wheels. Ho Chi Minh's famous street stalls serve local specials such as *mien ga,* vermicelli, chicken, and mushrooms in a delicate soup; *lau hai san,* a tangy seafood soup with mustard greens; and, of course, *pho,* Vietnam's staple noodle soup.

Expensive

Amigo ★★ ARGENTINE/STEAKHOUSE This is one of those expat gems you'll want to seek out. Its serves some of the best steaks you'll ever have—anywhere. The roomy two-floor downtown setting has an Argentine steakhouse theme, laid-back but classy. The friendly staff and chummy atmosphere around the imposing bar will make you feel at home. But it's the food that sells this place: imported steak done just how you like it, chargrilled to perfection (not pan-fried, as is common in this part of the world). The filet mignon with red shallots would hold its own in the heart of Chicago. There's also a full raw bar and a roster of seafood specials and salads. Entrees come with baked potatoes and corn; for a real slice of home, follow up with apple strudel or ice-cream roulade. The great wine list features Argentine and Chilean reds, among others; there's also a full-service bar.

55 Nguyen Hue St., District 1. ✆ **08/3829-0437.** Main courses 285,000VND–500,000VND ($16–$28/£11–£19). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 5–11pm.

Hoi An ★★ VIETNAMESE Run by the same folks who bring you Mandarin just around the corner (see below), Hoi An serves a similar complement of fine, authentic Vietnamese; here the focus is on central Vietnam's lighter fare and cuisine from Hoi An, Hue, and Saigon. On busy Le Thanh Ton just north of the town center, the building is a nice re-creation of a traditional Vietnamese home, and the upstairs dining room is an interesting faux-rustic blend of wood and bamboo. Presentation here is original; witness the hollowed coconut used to serve fine crab and asparagus. Try the drunken shrimp, large prawns soaked in rice whiskey and pan-fried tableside. Order a cover-the-table meal for a group, and you're sure to go away smiling. Call ahead to ask about the authentic Vietnamese classical music (most nights).

11 Le Thanh Ton St., District 1. ✆ **08/3823-7694.** Main courses $8.70–$48 (£5.80–£32). AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 5:30–11pm.

Mandarin ★★ VIETNAMESE/CHINESE On a quiet side street between busy Le Than Thon and the river, cross the threshold at Mandarin and enter a quaint, elegant oasis that will have you forgetting the city outside. The decor is an upscale Chinese motif with timber beams, fine screen paintings, and artwork. It's plush but not stuffy; you'll feel comfortable in casual clothes or a suit. The staff is attentive but doesn't hover and is helpful with suggestions and explanations. Ask about daily specials and set menus. Don't miss the excellent spicy sautéed beef, served in bamboo with rice, or the famed duck done in sweet "Mandarin style." The steamed garlic in lobster is as good as it sounds; the seafood steamboat for four is a real coup. The restaurant features a live classical trio (call ahead for the schedule).

11A Ngo Van Nam, District 1. ✆ **08/3822-9783.** Fax 08/3825-6185. Main courses $6.90–$60 (£4.60–£40); set menus from $38 (£25) per person (minimum 2 people). AE, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10pm.

Skewers ★ MEDITERRANEAN The best food at this chic bistro does in fact come on skewers; barbecue entrees, particularly the lamb kabobs, are delicious. Also try the

moussaka, grilled Moroccan sea bass, good pastas, vodka-flamed beef, or ribs dipped in honey. All the flame-bursting barbecuing is done in an open-air kitchen at the front of the restaurant—fun to watch. The salads are delicious, and the light meals and starters include great dips such as hummus and baba ghanouj. The atmosphere is candlelit and cozy, a great spot for a romantic evening.

9A Thai Van Lung St., District 1. ✆ **08/3829-2216.** Main courses 50,000VND–150,000VND ($2.80–$8.45/£1.90–£5.65). MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:30am–2pm; daily 6–10:30pm.

Song Ngu ★ VIETNAMESE/SEAFOOD Ask any Saigonese, and they'll help you find Song Ngu. Offset from a relatively quiet street, the restaurant is a popular place for locals and tour groups (who sit in a separate room). It's an old standby for good reason: Though the interior is nothing special, the food is anything but bland. The chefs are imaginative, the ingredients are fresh, and the portions are plentiful. And if it comes out of the water, Song Ngu does it right. Crab spring rolls, scallops, and steamed clams with lemon grass are a good start, but for the indecisive, there's an extensive list of the chef's recommendations.

70 Suong Nguyen Anh St., District 1. ✆ **08/3822-4798.** A la carte dishes 70,000VND–380,000VND ($3.95–$21/£2.60–£14). MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 5–10pm.

Square One ★★ VIETNAMESE/WESTERN You don't come to Square One to eat, you come to spend an evening paying homage to good food. The cooks behind the glass partitions look confident and are constantly in motion, grilling seafood, changing charcoal, or wrapping fish in giant pandanus leaves. The menu is divided into traditional Vietnamese starters and mains and Western dishes. The spring rolls—pork, bean sprouts, and mint wrapped in fresh rice paper, then wrapped in a cabbage leaf and tied together with a strip of pandanus leaf—are light, crunchy, and incredibly fresh. Vietnamese dishes are meant to be shared, so expect large portions for main courses (the red grouper, grilled to perfection and served with a zesty chile sauce, is more than enough for two people). Early evening, chill lounge music segues into a funkier upbeat tempo after 9pm. Get a table facing one of the open kitchens—it's better than people-watching.

3/F Park Hyatt Hotel. ✆ **08/3824-1234.** Main courses $8–$32 (£5.30–£21); hefty steaks on the Western menu $32–$85 (£21–£57). AE, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm.

Moderate

Al Fresco's Café and Grill ★ Kids WESTERN Just like the popular Al Fresco's in Hanoi, this new location in the heart of Saigon (just a stone's throw from the Sheraton) is Vietnam's answer to TGI Friday's. Burgers, steaks, popular ribs, good pizzas, pastas, and hearty salads all stick to your ribs. Worthwhile starters include chicken wings, satay, and fried calamari. Al Fresco's is the best choice for Western comfort foods or for something familiar—kids love it. Expat management and ultrafriendly waitstaff make a visit here a welcome slice of home.

27 Dong Du, District 1. ✆ **08/3822-7317.** Main courses 170,000VND–338,000VND ($9.60–$19/£6.40–£13). MC, V. Daily 9am–11pm.

Augustin ★ FRENCH On the quaint, up-and-coming "restaurant row" of Ngueyen Thiep (just off Don Khoi), this bright, lively restaurant is a favorite with French expats and tourists. The food is simple yet innovative French fare, including beef *pot-au-feu* and sea-bass tartare with olives. Try the seafood stew, lightly seasoned with saffron and packed with fish, clams, and shrimp. The seating is quite cozy, especially since the place is always full, and the Vietnamese staff is exceptionally friendly, speaking both French and English.

The menu is bilingual, too. A large French wine list and classic dessert menu finish off a delightful meal.

10 Nguyen Thiep, District 1. ✆ **08/3829-2941.** Main courses 120,000VND–220,000VND ($6.75–$12/£4.50–£8.30). No credit cards. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6–10:30pm.

Lemongrass VIETNAMESE On a romantic side street that's becoming its own "restaurant row" in the downtown area, this place has three floors of subdued fine dining—a great place to duck out of the midday sun. The atmosphere is candlelit and intimate, very Vietnamese, with cane furniture and tile floors, yet it's not overly formal. Set lunches are an affordable and light option: soup, spring rolls, and a light curry for $2 (£1.30). The extensive menu emphasizes seafood and seasonal specials. Particularly outstanding are the deep-fried prawns in coconut batter and the crab sautéed in salt-and-pepper sauce. Go with a group, if possible, and sample as many delicacies as possible.

4 Nguyen Thiep St., District 1. ✆ **08/3822-0496.** Main courses 50,000VND–390,000VND ($2.80–$22/£1.90–£15); lunch set menus from 50,000VND ($2.80/£1.90). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 5–10pm.

The Refinery ★ FRENCH This French bistro is built in the former headquarters of the leading opium refinery (hence the name) of old Indochine. They've got a great selection of light and filling food that's made just right. The eggplant with tomato-mint sauce, goat's cheese, and brown and wild rice is a perfect blend of healthy starches and cheesy indulgence. Being a bistro, they're always ready to serve a coq au vin at the drop of a hat. The understated decor makes for casual, intimate dining.

74/7 Hai Ba Trung St. (walk through the traditional yellow gate; it's on your left after about 100m/328 ft.), District 1. ✆ **08/3823-0509.** Main courses 80,000VND–245,000VND ($4.50–$14/£3–£9.20). MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Temple Club ★★ VIETNAMESE For atmosphere alone, the Temple Club is a must-see in Ho Chi Minh. As the name suggests, this is a turn-of-the-20th-century Chinese temple with original wood and masonry. The ceiling is high, the walls are exposed brick, the floor is terra cotta draped in antique throw rugs, and there are some great Buddhist tapestries and statuary on display. Patrons gather at a classic wooden bar and in a formal but comfortable dining room, as well as in the lounge area in the back for coffee and dessert. The cuisine is standard Vietnamese from all parts of the country. Abandon your diet and order the Hue-style spring rolls, pork filling in lattice wrappers fried to crispy perfection. The *tom me,* prawns in tamarind sauce, is a smart choice as well. The banana-coconut-cream pudding with sesame seeds is a decadent dessert, and the coffee is the real thing.

29 Ton That Thiep St., District 1. ✆ **08/3829-9244.** Main courses 90,000VND–200,000VND ($5.10–$11/£3.40–£7.50). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–2pm and 5–11pm.

Warda ★ LEBANESE You walk into this place and get a tiny urge to break into a belly dance. Beaded turquoise curtains mark the entrance to a semicircle cave of mirrors (the bathrooms naturally), and there's an outdoor terrace protected by a patterned awning that looks like something out of Arabian Nights. The food is as sumptuous as the decor. The fish and pear tajine, a braised sea bass marinated in olive oil, parsley, and chile, with thin pear slices, is divine. The fish falls apart at the mere touch of your fork. Drinks have a hint of Arabic style, such as bitter saffron or rose martinis. If you've got a sweet tooth, you'll love the crispy phyllo pastry filled with almond paste for dessert, and for those watching the waistline, an order of apple-flavored shisha should round out the evening quite nicely.

71/7 Mac Thi Buoi St., District 1. ✆ **08/3823-3822.** Main courses 125,000VND–250,000VND ($7.05–$14/£4.70–£9.40). MC, V. Daily 9am–midnight.

Xu ★★ VIETNAMESE Co-owner Bien Nguyen left school at 15 to work in the food and beverage industry. An old French couple took him under their wing and taught him, as he puts it, "the A to Z of F and B." Saigon is grateful to that couple and to Bien, who has created one of the finest restaurants Saigon has on offer. The food is innovative and yet retains the traditional taste and feel of Vietnamese eats. Highly recommend is the Seasbass Taste, a sampler plate that comes with perfect, small portions of grilled sea bass over mashed potatoes, a crispy Vietnamese pancake with fresh veggies, and a sea bass rice flour roll, or *banh cuon.* The decor is modern, with retro wooden chairs fixed with deep-purple velvet cushions. The lounge is a great place for pre- and after-dinner drinks. The first-floor coffee bar is good for a casual grilled sandwich at lunch.

71–75 Hai Ba Trung, District 1. ✆ **08/3824-8468.** Main courses 75,000VND –330,000VND ($4.20–$19/£2.80–£12). AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight.

Inexpensive

Ngon Restaurant ★★★ Finds VIETNAMESE *Ngon* means "delicious," and, for authentic Vietnamese, this restaurant lives up to its name and is the best in Vietnam. This Ho Chi Minh institution is always packed with both locals and tourists; it has even built a new location nearby to handle the overflow. The atmosphere is chaotic: a cacophony of chattering guests, shouting waiters, and clanging pots and pans. Fans blow mist to quell the smoky cooking fires of the open-air kitchen. Seating is a mix of regular tables in the colonial and those on the balcony or in the courtyard out back. The main building is surrounded by cooking stations, each serving a regional specialty; it's like someone went around the country head-hunting all of the best street-side chefs. Waitstaff simply act as liaisons among the many cooks. The menu is a survey course in Vietnamese cooking, and the tuition is low. Go with a Vietnamese friend, if you can, or someone who can explain the regional specialties. If you're alone, just point and shoot; everything is good. There's Hue-style *bun bo,* cold noodles with beef; a catalog of *pho,* noodle soup; and all kinds of seafood prepared the way you like. Meals here are best done as leisurely, multicourse affairs, but stop by for a snack if you're visiting the Reunification Palace or any sights downtown. Don't miss it.

138 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, District 1. ✆ **08/3829-9449.** Main courses 26,000VND–115,000VND ($1.50–$6.50/95p–£4.30). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Restaurant 13 ★ VIETNAMESE With all the upscale eateries popping up downtown, you might miss out on an old-school standby like this little storefront. Tucked between high-rises and just off Dong Khoi, it's one of many restaurants whose name is its street number (if this one is busy, try no. 19). The atmosphere is plain, but the kitchen serves excellent traditional Vietnamese food without any bells, whistles, or sticker shock. The place is jolly and filled with locals, tourists, and expats. Ask what's good, or try the seafood, anything done in coconut broth, or the sautéed squid with citronella and red pepper. The food is carefully prepared and the waitstaff is very professional for this price range.

13 Ngo Duc Ke, District 1. ✆ **08/3239-314.** Main courses 18,000VND–60,000VND ($1–$3.40/65p–£2.25). No credit cards. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Snacks & Cafes

When touring the city, stop to savor a moment at **Au Parc** (23 Han Thuyen St., District 1; ✆ **08/3829-2772**), a lovely spot nestled in a two-story colonial house between the Reunification Palace and the Notre Dame Cathedral. It serves great fruit smoothies and buzzes with expats at lunchtime.

Zen & the Art of Pho

Pho, or Vietnamese noodle soup, has become a popular dish in the West, but in Vietnam it is a national obsession, a dish eaten any time of day. Its simplicity is the attraction: beef stock with rice noodles garnished as you like, with meat and herbs, all ingredients left to speak for themselves. You can eat *pho* on any street corner and in any market, but there are a few good places in Saigon with English menus and a high standard of cleanliness. **Pho 2000,** on Tran Hung Dao just cater-cornered to the Benh Thanh Market, is a Saigon institution and a beehive of activity day or night. Bill Clinton even made a visit here, and if Bubba liked it, it has to be good. **Pho 24,** on Nguyen Thiep Street, a little "restaurant row" off busy Dong Khoi, serves a busy crowd all day long in its cool, clean storefront. On Don Khoi, across from the Grand Hotel, look for the large **Pho** sign and Japanese characters at 37 Don Khoi St.; inside, the place is covered in woodcarvings and serves great soups—popular with Japanese tourists.

Bon Bo Xu ★ (28 Cao Ba Quat, District 1; ✆ **08/3822-1539**) is a new eatery from the folks behind Xu (see above). Head here to try *Bon bo Hue,* a savory beef and noodle dish from the former Imperial city, in an upscale environment.

Bach Dang ★ (26 Le Loi St., District 1), in the heart of old Saigon, is three floors of always crowded fun. It's the best place in town for ice cream and to meet local people—a Saigon institution, really.

Café Central, in the Sun Wah Tower (115 Nguyen Hue St., District 1; ✆ **08/3821-9303**), is a great little international deli. Stop in for breakfast or a sandwich any time; the kind staff makes you feel like you've stepped into an old greasy spoon (with all the same standbys on the menu).

Fanny, just below the Temple Club (48 Ton That Thiep St., District 1; ✆ **08/3821-1630**), serves the real-deal French glacées.

Centro (11–13 Lam Son Sq., District 1; ✆ **08/3827-5946**) is a cozy, upmarket coffee corner right next to the Caravelle Hotel.

Mojo (88 Dong Khoi St. District 1; ✆ **08/3827-2828**) is a funky little place that serves hearty crust-free sandwiches. It's a great place to do some people-watching.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

In District 1

Ben Thanh Market ★★ The clock tower over the main entrance to what was formerly known as Les Halles Centrale is the symbol of Saigon, and the market might as well be, too. Opened first in 1914, it's a crowded place, a boon for pickpockets with its narrow, one-way aisles, and loaded with vendors clamoring to sell you postcards and cheap goods (T-shirts, aluminum wares, silk, bamboo, and lacquer). There will be so many people calling out to you that you'll feel like the belle of the ball—or a wallet with legs. The wet market, with its selection of meat, fish, produce, and flowers, is interesting and hassle-free; no one will foist a fish on you. In open-air stalls surrounding the market

are some nice little eateries. The adventurous can try all kinds of local specialties for next to nothing.

At the intersection of Le Loi, Ham Nghi, Tran Hung Dao, and Le Lai sts., District 1. Daily early morning–night.

City Hall Saigon's city hall was constructed between 1902 and 1908, a fantastic and ornate example of colonial architecture. Unfortunately, it's not open to the public.

Facing Nguyen Hue Blvd., District 1.

General Post Office (Buu Dien) ★ In this grand old colonial building, you can check out the huge maps of Vietnam on either side of the main entrance and the huge portrait of Uncle Ho in the rear. The specialty-stamps counter has some great collector sets for sale.

2 Coq Xu Paris, District 1. Daily 6:30am–10pm.

Ho Chi Minh City Museum ★ Originally built in 1890 by the French as a commercial museum, then turned into a governor's palace, a committee building, and later the Revolutionary Museum, the institution today covers a broad range, from archaeology to ethnic survey and documents from the city's founding in the 1600s. The second floor is heavy on Vietnam's ongoing revolution, with displays of weaponry and memorabilia from the period of struggle against imperialism and many flags, placards, and dispatches from the rise of communism, beginning with the August Revolution of 1945 all the way to the fall of Saigon. The bias is heavy, of course, but it is interesting to note how the displays, not unlike socialist ideals, are a bit frayed around the edges in a land that is racing pell-mell toward a market economy. The grounds are picturesque, which explains the many young couples posing for wedding photos, and there is an interesting collection of captured U.S. fighter planes, tanks, and artillery in the main courtyard. Underneath the building is a series of tunnels (closed to the public) leading to the Reunification Palace, once used by former president Ngo Dinh Diem as a hide-out before his execution in 1962.

65 Ly Tu Trong St., District 1. ✆ **08/3829-9741.** Admission 15,000VND (85¢/55p). Daily 8am–5pm.

Notre Dame Cathedral ★ The neo-Romanesque cathedral was constructed between 1877 and 1883 using bricks from Marseilles and stained-glass windows from Chartres. Sunday services are in Vietnamese and English. Whatever your faith is, don't miss it.

Near the intersection of Dong Khoi and Nguyen Du sts., District 1. Visitor hours Mon–Sat 8–10:30am and 3–4pm. Sun services 5:30, 6:30, 7:30, and 9:30am, and 4, 5:15, and 6:30pm.

Reunification Palace ★ Designed as the home of former president Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S.-backed leader of Vietnam in the 1960s, this building is most notable for its symbolic role in the fall of Saigon in April 1975, when its gates were breached by North Vietnamese tanks and the victor's flag hung on the balcony. Those very tanks that crashed through the gates are enshrined in the entryway, and photos and accounts of their drivers are on display. Built on the site of the French governor general's home, called the Norodom Palace, the current modern building, designed when "modern" meant "sterile," was completed in 1966. Like the Bao Dai Palace in Dalat, the Reunification Palace is a series of rather empty rooms that are nevertheless interesting because they specialize in period kitsch and haven't been gussied up a bit. The private quarters, dining rooms, entertainment lounges, and president's office look like everybody just up and left. Most interesting is the war command room, with its huge maps and old communications

equipment, as well as the basement labyrinth. There is an ongoing screening of a propagandistic video about the war years in the basement.

106 Nguyen Du St., District 1. No phone. Admission 15,000VND (85¢/55p). Daily 7:30–11am and 1–4pm.

Saigon Opera House (Ho Chi Minh Municipal Theater) This magnificent building was built at the turn of the 20th century and renovated in the 1940s. Its three stories hold 1,800 seats. Today, it hosts very little in terms of performances, but it is a stalwart atmospheric holdout amid steel-and-glass downtown.

At the intersection of Le Loi and Dong Khoi sts.

Vietnam History Museum ★★ Housed in a rambling new concrete pagoda-like structure, the museum presents a clear picture of Vietnamese history, with a focus on the south. Highlights include an excellent selection of Cham sculpture and the best collection of ancient ceramics in Vietnam. Weaponry from the 14th century on is displayed; one yard is nothing but cannons. One wing is dedicated to ethnic minorities of the south, including photos, costumes, and household implements. Nguyen Dynasty (1700–1945) clothing and housewares are also on exhibit, as are archaeological artifacts from prehistoric Saigon. Its 19th- and early-20th-century histories are shown using photos and, curiously, a female corpse unearthed as construction teams broke ground for a recent housing project. There are even some general background explanations in English, something missing from most Vietnamese museums.

2 Nguyen Binh Khiem, District 1. ✆ **08/3829-8146.** Admission 15,000VND (85¢/55p). Daily 8–11am and 1–5pm.

In Other Districts

Cholon (District 5) ★★ Cholon is the sizable Chinese district of the city and probably the largest Chinatown in the world. It exists in many ways quite apart from Saigon. The Chinese began to settle the area in the early 1900s and never quite assimilated with the rest of Saigon, which causes a bit of resentment among the greater Vietnamese community. You'll sense the different environment immediately, and not only because of the Chinese-language signs.

A bustling commercial center, Cholon is a fascinating maze of temples, restaurants, jade ornaments, and medicine shops. Gone, however, are the brothels and opium dens of earlier days. You can lose yourself walking the narrow streets, but it makes sense to take a cyclo by the hour to see the sights.

Start at the **Binh Tay Market ★★**, on Phan Van Khoe Street, which is even more crowded than Ben Thanh and has many of the same goods, but with a Chinese flavor. You'll see a lot more produce, along with medicines, spices, cooking utensils, and plenty of hapless ducks and chickens tied in heaps. From Binh Tay, head up to Nguyen Trai, the district's main artery, to see some of the major temples on or around it. Be sure to see Quan Am, on Lao Tu Street off Luong Nhu Hoc, for its ornate exterior. Back on Nguyen Trai, Thien Hau Pagoda is dedicated to the goddess of the sea and was popular with seafarers making thanks for their safe trip from China to Vietnam. Finally, as you follow Nguyen Trai Street past Ly Thuong Kiet, you'll see the Cholon Mosque, the one indication of the district's small Muslim community.

Bordered by Hung Vuong to the north, Nguyen Van Cu to the east, the Ben Nghe Channel to the south, and Nguyen Thi Nho to the west, District 5.

Emperor Jade Pagoda (Phuoc Hai) ★★ One of the most interesting pagodas in Vietnam, the Emperor Jade is filled with smoky incense and fantastic carved figurines. It was built by the Cantonese community around the turn of the 20th century and is still buzzing with worshipers, many lounging in the front gardens. Take a moment to look at the elaborate statuary on the pagoda's roof. The dominant figure in the main hall is the Jade Emperor himself; referred to as the "god of the heavens," the emperor decides who will enter and who will be refused. He looks an awful lot like Confucius, only meaner. In an anteroom to the left, you'll see Kim Hua, a goddess of fertility, and the King of Hell in another corner with his minions—he undoubtedly gets those the Jade Emperor rejects. It's spooky.

73 Mai Thi Luu St., District 3. Daily 8am–5pm.

Giac Lam Pagoda ★ Giac Lam, built in 1744, is the oldest pagoda in Saigon. The garden in front features the ornate tombs of venerated monks, as well as a rare Bodhi tree. Next to the tree is a regular feature of Vietnamese Buddhist temples, a gleaming white statue of Quan The Am Bo Tat (Avalokitesvara, the goddess of mercy) standing on a lotus blossom, a symbol of purity. Inside the temple is a spooky funerary chamber, with photos of monks gone by, and a central chamber chock-full of statues. Take a look at the outside courtyard as well.

118 Lac Long Quan St., District 5. Daily 8am–5pm.

War Remnants Museum ★★ This museum has a comprehensive collection of the machinery, weapons, photos, and documentation of Vietnam's wars with both the French and the Americans (the emphasis is heavily on the latter). It was once called the War Crimes Museum, which should give you an idea of whose side of the story is being told here. Short of being outright recrimination, this museum is a call for peace and a hope that history is not repeated—visitors are even asked to sign a petition against the kind of aerial carpet-bombing that so devastated the people of Vietnam. The exhibit begins to the right of the entrance with a room listing war facts: troop numbers, bomb tonnage, and statistics on international involvement in the conflict and numbers of casualties on both sides. Next is a room dedicated to the journalists who were lost in wartime. The exhibits are constantly evolving; one room is devoted to biological warfare, another to weaponry, and another to worldwide demonstrations for peace. The explanations, which include English translations, are very thorough. There is a large collection of bombs, planes, tanks, and war machinery in the main courtyard. Kids will love it, but you might want to think twice before taking them inside to see things like wall-size photos of the My Lai massacre and the bottled deformed fetus supposedly damaged by Agent Orange. There is also a model of the French colonial prisons, called the Tiger Cages, on the grounds.

28 Vo Van Tan St., District 3. ✆ **08/3930-2112.** Admission 10,000VND (55¢/35p). Daily 7:30am–noon and 1:30–5pm.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

There are two excellent 18-hole golf courses at the **Vietnam Golf & Country Club.** The clubhouse is at Long Thanh My Ward, District 9 (✆ **08/3280-0124;** fax 08/280-0127; www.vietnamgolfcc.com). Fees are $90 (£60) during the week for nonmembers, and $110 (£73) on Saturday and Sunday. Save a few bucks and play on Golf Day (Wed) for $57 (£38); women play for $47 (£31) Thursdays.

Tennis enthusiasts can find courts at **Lan Anh International Tennis Court** (291 Cach Mang Than Tam, District 10; ✆ **08/3862-7144**).

The best gym in town is at the Park Hyatt (p. 369); day rates are $28 (£19) for adults, $25 (£17) for kids. The pool and well-equipped gym and spa at the **Caravelle Hotel** (p. 367) are also available for nonguests at a day rate of $20 (£13).

SHOPPING

Saigon has a good selection of silk, fashion, lacquer, embroidery, and housewares. Prices are higher than elsewhere in Vietnam, but the offerings are more sophisticated. Stores are open daily from around 8am to 7pm. Credit cards are widely accepted, except for in the markets.

Dong Khoi is the city's premier shopping street. Formerly Rue Catinat, it was a veritable Rue de la Paix in colonial times. Notable shops include **Mystere** (141 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3823-9615**) for its beautiful silverware and scarves. Down the way is **Tombo** (145 Dong Khoi St.), which has a huge selection of affordable bags. **Authentique Interiors** (6 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3823-8811**) specializes in fine pottery and table settings. **Tuyet Lan** (99 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3827-4253**) has a quality selection of ready-made clothing and can, of course, whip something up for you in a day. **Khai Silk** (107 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3829-1146**) has a fine outlet right in the heart of the city and offers ready-to-wear and fitted silk clothing. For top-notch lacquerware and lacquer furniture, visit **Dragon Smile** on a parallel street to Dong Khoi (74/5 Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **08/3823-1788**). Nearby Le Thanh Ton Street is another shopping avenue. Look for **Kenly Silk** (132 Le Thanh Ton St.; ✆ **08/3829-3847**), a brand-name supplier with the best ready-to-wear silk garments in the business. **Liti** (76E Le Thanh Ton St.; ✆ **08/3824-7114**) has a handsome assortment of antique lace, jewelry, and knickknacks such as blenders and 1950s sunglasses. Next door, Hanoi-based **Song** (76D Le Thanh Ton St.; ✆ **08/3824-6986**) carries gorgeous, original cotton and hemp designs.

Another local label worth checking out is **Ipa-Nima** (85 Pasteur St.; ✆ **08/3824-2701**), which stocks colorful bags and totes.

ART GALLERIES The **Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts Museum** (97A Pho Duc Chinh St., District 1; ✆ **08/3829-4441;** Tues–Sun 9am–4:45pm; admission 10,000VND/55¢/35p) is the place to start if you're truly keen; the evolving collection features area artists' works in sculpture, oil, and lacquer—a good glimpse into the local scene. **Lac Hong Art Gallery,** on the ground floor of the museum (✆ **08/3821-3771**), features the works of many famous Vietnamese artists.

Slip into **Hanoi Gallery** (43 Le Loi St.; ✆ **08/3821-8211**) to see a variety of propaganda posters. Collectors will find original works (with prices to match), but the bargains are in the reproductions, whose classic communist-style images and messages range from a call to arms during the American war to a call to plant more trees during peacetime. It's worth a perusal to find a unique gift.

There are galleries throughout the city, many clustered around Dong Khoi and near the major hotels. Reproduction artists are everywhere. Here are a few popular galleries in town: **Ancient Gallery** (50 Mac Thi Buoi St., District 1, near Saigon Sakura Restaurant; ✆ **08/3822-7962**), **Hien Minh** (32 Dong Khoi St., District 1; ✆ **08/3829-5520**), **Particular Art Gallery** (123 Le Loi St., District 1; ✆ **08/3821-3019**), and **101 Catinat** (101 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3822-7643**). If these pique your curiosity, pick up a copy of *Vietnam Discovery* or *The Guide* for further listings.

BOOKSTORES Ho Chi Minh City's official foreign-language bookstore, **Xuan Thu** (185 Dong Khoi St., across from the Continental Hotel; ✆ **08/3822-4670**), has a good

selection of classics, as well as some foreign-language newspapers. There are also several small bookshops on De Tham Street in the backpacker area.

HO CHI MINH CITY AFTER DARK

When Vietnam made a fresh entry onto the world scene in the mid-1990s, Ho Chi Minh City quickly became one of the hippest party towns in the East. The mood has sobered somewhat, but it's still a fun place. Everything is clustered in District 1; ask expats in places such as **Saigon Saigon** (see below) about any club happenings. As for cultural events, Saigon is sadly devoid of anything really terrific, except for a few cultural dinner and dance shows.

BARS & CLUBS Head to the basement of the central opera house for **Q Bar** (7 Cong Truong Lam Son; ✆ **08/3823-3479;** www.qbarsaigon.com), the town's hippest club. It's a funky catacomb with good music, cocktail nooks, and an eclectic mix of people.

Atop the Caravelle Hotel, **Saigon Saigon** (19 Lam Son Sq.; ✆ **08/3823-4999**) is a very popular spot featuring live music and a terrific view. Next door at the Sheraton, **Level 23** (88 Dong Khoi St.; ✆ **08/3827-2828**) is a double-height rotunda overlooking town. Good live bands play here—it's Indochina meets the Hard Rock Cafe on any given evening.

Pacharan (97 Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **08/3825-6024**), a swanky Spanish tapas bar downtown, is a great place to start your evening. **Vasco's Bar,** at the Refinery restaurant (16 Cao Ba Quat St.; ✆ **08/3824-3148**), is an atmospheric choice. On Dong Du Street, an alleyway off Dong Khoi, you'll find **qing** (31 Dong Du St.; ✆ **08/3823-2414**) and **Zan Z Bar** (41 Dong Du St.; ✆ **08/3822-7375**), both classy cocktail lounges.

Don't miss the brick-walled Irish pub **O'Briens** (74A Hai Ba Trung St.; ✆ **08/3829-3198**) for pints and pizza. **Sheridan's** (17/13 Le Thanh Ton St.; ✆ **08/3823-0793**) is another friendly watering hole with character.

The Pham Ngu Lao area stays up late, and **Allez Boo** (187 Pham Ngu Lao; ✆ **08/3837-2505**) is always up till the wee hours, as are the many street-side beer stalls selling Bia Hoi for pennies a glass.

THE PERFORMING ARTS A few hotels stage traditional music and dance shows. The **"Au Co" Traditional Troupe** has performed abroad, but calls the Skyview Restaurant (at the Mondial Hotel, 109 Dong Khoi St., District 1; ✆ **08/3849-6291**) home. Call ahead for the performance schedule. The **Rex Hotel** (141 Nguyen Hue Blvd.; ✆ **08/3829-2185**) has regular performances daily at 7:30pm.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HO CHI MINH CITY

See "Visitor Information & Tours," earlier in this section, for tour providers to the following sights.

Cao Dai Holy See Temple ★★ The Cao Dai religion is less than 100 years old and is a broad, inclusive faith that sprang from Buddhist origins to embrace Jesus, Mohammed, and other nontraditional, latter-day saints such as Louis Pasteur, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Victor Hugo. Practitioners of Cao Daism are pacifists, pray four times daily, and follow a vegetarian diet for 10 days out of every month. Cao Daism is practiced by only a small percentage of Vietnamese people, mostly in the south, but you'll see temples scattered far and wide—easily recognizable by the all-seeing eye, which, oddly enough, looks something like the eye on the U.S. dollar. Often included with trips to the Cu Chi Tunnels (see below), the temple at Tay Ninh is the spiritual center—the Cao Dai Vatican, if you will—and the country's largest. Visitors are welcome at any of the four

daily ceremonies, but all are asked to wear trousers covering the knee, remove their shoes before entering, and act politely, quietly observing the ceremony from the balcony area. The temple interior is a colorful wedding cake, with bright murals and carved pillars. Cao Dai supplicants wear either white suits or colorful robes, each color denoting what root of Cao Daism they practice: Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or Taoist. On the ride here, you'll pass through the town of Trang Bang, site of the famous photo of 9-year-old Kim Phuc, who was burned by napalm. The road also passes Nui Ba Den, the Black Virgin Mountain, which marked the end of the Ho Chi Minh trail from the north and was a Viet Cong stronghold during the war era.

About 90km (56 miles) northwest of Ho Chi Minh City. Daily dawn–dusk.

Cu Chi Tunnels ★★ Vietnamese are proud of their resolve in their long history of struggle against invading armies, and the story of the people of Cu Chi is indicative of that spirit. The Cu Chi area lies at the end of the Ho Chi Minh trail and was the base from which Ho Chi Minh gorillas used to attack Saigon. As a result, the whole area became a "free fire zone" and was carpet-bombed in one of many American "scorched-earth" policies. But the residents of Cu Chi took their war underground, literally, developing a network of tunnels that, at its height, stretched as far as Cambodia and included meeting rooms, kitchens, and triage areas, an effective network for waging guerilla warfare on nearby U.S. troops. The U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division was just next door, and there are detailed maps denoting land that was either U.S.-held, Vietminh-held, or in dispute.

Visitors first watch a war-era propaganda film that is so over the top, it's fun. The site supports a small museum of photos and artifacts, as well as an extensive outdoor exhibit of guerrilla snares and reconstructions of the original tunnels and bunkers. Dress appropriately if you choose to get down in the tunnels; the experience is dirty and claustrophobic. There is also a shooting range where, for $1 (65p) per bullet, you can try your hand at firing anything from a shotgun to an AK-47. At the end of the tour, visit the dining hall and try the steamed tapioca that was a Cu Chi staple. Souvenir hawkers abound. A half-day trip can be arranged with any tour company in Saigon, often including a visit to the Cao Dai Temple (see above).

About 65km (40 miles) northwest of Ho Chi Minh City. Daily dawn–dusk. Admission 65,000VND ($3.65/£2.45).

14 THE MEKONG DELTA

Don't leave without seeing the Mekong Delta, even for just a day. The delta is a region of waterways formed by the Mekong River, covering an area of about 60,000 sq. km (37,200 sq. miles) and with a population of 17 million, most engaged in farming and fishing. Often called the breadbasket of Vietnam, the Mekong Delta accounts for more than an estimated 50% of rice production. The land is tessellated with bright-green rice paddies, fruit orchards, sugar cane fields, and vegetable gardens, and its waters are busy with boats and fish farms.

The region's urban centers, Can Tho and Chau Doc, are good bases for tours and exploration of the countryside by road and canal. As you cruise slowly along the meandering canals, you'll see locals living right beside the water on stilt houses or houseboats—a fascinating glimpse into a way of life that has survived intact for hundreds of

years. In the many floating markets, trade is conducted from boat to boat in areas teeming with activity and sellers touting their wares. Delta people are friendly and unaffected, and their cuisine is delicious—lots of good seafood, of course.

Coming south from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the town you'll probably reach first is **My Tho,** but you should try to make it down at least as far as **Can Tho,** the delta's largest city. It has a bustling riverfront and waterway. About 32km (20 miles) from Can Tho is **Phung Hiep,** the biggest water market in the region. **Chau Doc** is another picturesque town and a popular gateway to Cambodia. Look for unique floating markets, weaving villages, and expansive fish farms, all visited on tours.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

To cope with the necessary logistics, going with a travel agent is your best bet in the Mekong Delta. They offer everything from day trips to 3-day tours. Our pick is **Ann Tours** (58 Ton That Tung St., District 1; ✆ **08/833-2564;** fax 08/832-3866; www.anntours.com) for custom excursions that take you off the beaten path; prices start at $45 (£30) per day with a group.

Saigontourist (49 Le Thanh Ton St., District 1; ✆ **08/829-4554;** fax 08/822-4987; www.saigon-tourist.com) is a large government operation that runs regular buses and tours for groups big and small. Tour quality—and price—is higher than at the budget tourist cafes.

The tourist cafes all run standard, affordable trips to the Mekong Delta. Contact **Sinh Café** (246–8 De Tham St., District 1; ✆ **08/836-7338** or 08/837-6833) for 2- and 3-day tours starting at $10 (£5.65) per day (with optional connection to Cambodia).

WHERE TO STAY

Victoria Hotels (www.victoriahotels-asia.com) has two properties on the Mekong Delta, in Can Tho (✆ **0710/810-111**) and Chau Doc (✆ **076/865-010**). New but colonial-style rooms and services at riverside come priced from just $155 (£103). Nothing compares.

Cambodia

by Sherisse Pham

It wasn't long ago that travel guidebooks about Cambodia weren't much more than protracted warnings and lists of safety precautions, and for good reason: Following years of war, the chaos and genocide of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, and a long period of civil and political instability, Cambodia was until recently an armed camp closed to foreign visitors (or open only to travelers of the danger-seeking variety). But Cambodia is healing, and, though this is a process that will take years, the country is enjoying a period of relative stability under a coalition government. Cambodia offers travelers a host of experiences, from the legacy of ancient architecture to a growing urban capital and beautiful countryside. Even the shortest visit offers a look into a vibrant ancient culture and a chance to meet with a very kind and resilient people, one of the country's greatest attributes.

What brings so many to this Buddhist land of smiles is **Angkor Wat,** the ancient capital and one of the man-made wonders of the world. Visiting the monumental Hindu complex of behemoth block temples, to wering spires, giant carved faces, and ornate bas-reliefs is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Angkor Wat is a pilgrimage point for temple aficionados and a place of spiritual significance to many.

Most travelers limit their visit to a few days at the temples and the major sites in the growing capital, **Phnom Penh,** which is tatty but charming, with crumbling French colonial architecture and a splendid palace.

But these days, travel in rural Cambodia, once unheard of, is now limited only by your tolerance for bumpy roads and rustic accommodations (though this, too, is changing in places). Bouncing around the hinterlands of Cambodia still begs caution, though, and travelers should be aware of the mass amount of UXO (unexploded ordnance, or mines), poor road conditions, and the absence of proper medical services. Dusty roads pay off, however, when they connect hamlets rarely visited by outsiders or lead to unexplored rural ruins.

Cambodia is resplendent with natural gifts, and any of the larger tour operators are a good bet for arranging trips to the likes of mountainous **Ratanakiri,** in the northeast; the Thai border area; or rural towns along the **Mekong River,** the country's lifeline. The river connects with **Tonle Sap Lake,** Southeast Asia's largest lake, which is surrounded by fertile lowlands.

The country's only port, **Sihanoukville,** is a popular beach destination, and **Kep,** sometimes called the Cambodian Riviera, remains an underdiscovered gem. Intrepid travelers commonly rent motorcycles or brave rattletrap buses to explore the country.

Known for warm, beguiling smiles, smiles that have weathered great hardship, Khmer people are very friendly, approachable, and helpful; but be warned that the hard sell is on in Cambodia, and you're sure to be harried, especially by the persistent young sellers at Angkor Wat and the motorcycle and tuk-tuk drivers in Phnom Penh. Nevertheless, with a little patience

and an exploratory attitude, travelers here are sure to meet with great kindness.

For years, the lawlessness of Cambodia attracted some rather dubious foreign visitors who came in droves for budget drugs and prostitution. Phnom Penh's expatriate community was notorious during years of instability. Even the U.N. troops that arrived in 1992 were as much a part of the problem in their support of local vice as they were in maintaining order and ensuring fair elections. "Sexpats" and drug tourists are on the wane in Cambodia, but, sadly, there still is a contingent of folks who come to take advantage of Cambodia's seedier stock in trade. There are new extradition treaties in place whereby foreign sex offenders in Cambodia can be tried for their crimes in their home country, but the prosecution process is still full of gaping loopholes and offenders easily fall through the cracks.

Tourism is growing in leaps and bounds, though, and there are many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) here to do their part to rebuild and support the growing nation. Their activities, centered in offices in Phnom Penh, are what keep social services and the infrastructure at subsistence levels. Volunteer opportunities abound. The number of foreign aid workers means increased quality of services, and the hotels and restaurants in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh are on par with any in the region (although outside of these two centers, choices are sparse).

For the Angkor temples alone, the trip to Cambodia is well worth it. A visit here is a chance to see a beguiling land shaking off the shackles of a devastating recent history to become an exciting tourist destination.

1 GETTING TO KNOW CAMBODIA

THE LAY OF THE LAND

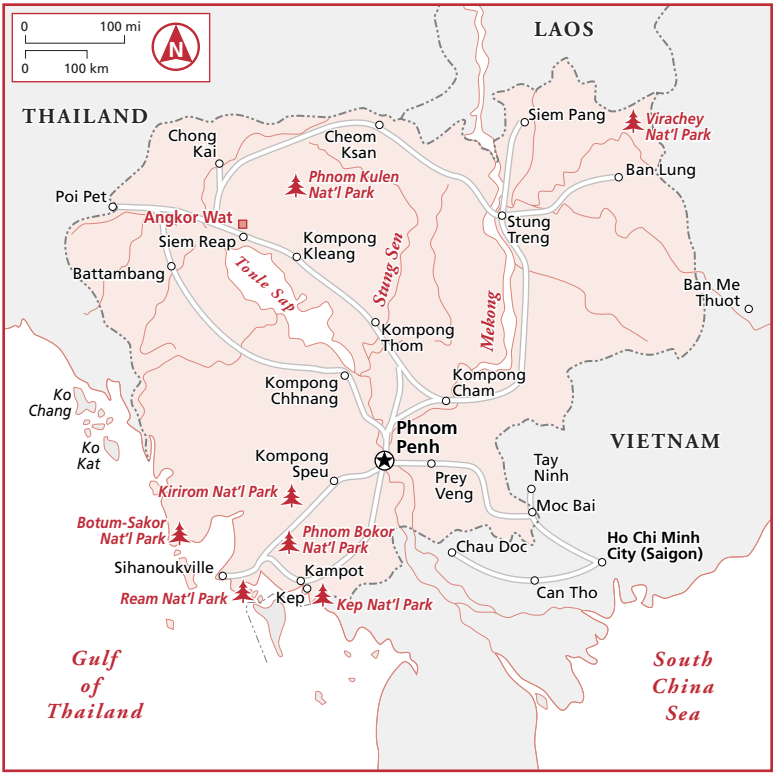
About the size of Missouri, some 181,035 sq. km (70,604 sq. miles), Cambodia has 20 provinces that are bordered by Laos in the north, Vietnam in the east, Thailand to the west, and the Gulf of Thailand to the south. There is just one marine port in Cambodia: Sihanoukville, connected via a major American-built highway with the capital and largest city, Phnom Penh, and now linked by air to Siem Reap.

The mighty Mekong River enters from Laos to the north and nearly bisects the country. It divides into two main tributaries at Phnom Penh before it traces a route to the delta in Vietnam, and most areas of population density lie along the valleys and fertile plains of this great river and its tributaries. Near Siem Reap, the Tonle Sap Lake is the largest lake in Southeast Asia. In the monsoon summer months, when the Mekong is swollen from the snows of Tibet, the river becomes choked with silt and backs up on the Mekong Delta. The result is an anomaly: The Tonle Sap River relieves the pressure by changing the direction of its flow and draining the Mekong Delta hundreds of miles in the opposite direction and into the Tonle Sap Lake.

The northeast of the country, Ratanakiri Province, and areas bordering Vietnam are quite mountainous and rugged, as are the Thai border areas defined by the Dangrek Mountains in the northwest and the Cardamom Mountains in the southwest. These jungle forests are a rich source for timber in the region, and steps toward preservation come slowly.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

Cambodia is populated by people of the **Mon-Khmer** ethnic group, who probably migrated from the north as far back as 1000 b.c. The area they settled was part of the



kingdom of Funan, an empire that extended into Laos and Vietnam, until the 6th century, when it was briefly absorbed into a rebel nation called Chenla. It then evolved into its glorious Angkor period in the 8th century, from which sprung many of Cambodia's treasures, most notably the lost city of Angkor.

The story of Khmer civilization is one of a slow decline from the zenith of the powerful Angkor civilization of the 11th century. The late 12th century was marked by internal rebellions. Angkor was lost to the Kingdom of Siam in 1431. Vietnam also had a hand in controlling the kingdom, to some degree, beginning in the 17th century. The French took over completely in 1863, followed by the Japanese, and then the French again. Cambodia finally regained independence in 1953 under the leadership of **Prince Norodom Sihanouk.** These years of alternating occupation had the country bouncing like a strategic Ping-Pong ball, and the Khmer kingdom's size was chiseled away considerably. Remaining is what we know today as Cambodia, a tiny land half the size of Germany.

Vietnamese communist outposts in the country drew Cambodia into the Vietnam conflict. The country was heavily bombed by American forces in the late 1960s. A U.S.-backed military coup followed in 1970, but in 1975 the infamous **Khmer Rouge,** led by the tyrannical **Pol Pot,** took over Cambodia, renamed it Kampuchea, and established a

totalitarian regime in the name of communism. Opposition—even imaginary opposition—was brutally crushed, resulting in the death of more than two million Cambodians. The civil and Vietnam wars decimated Cambodian infrastructure. Cambodia became, and still is, one of the world's poorest nations, with a mainly agrarian economy and a literacy rate of about 35%.

In response to Khmer Rouge infractions into its country, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 and occupied it with a small number of troops until 1989, installing a puppet regime led by **Hun Sen** as prime minister. When Vietnam departed, the United Nations stepped in and engineered a fragile coalition government between the Sihanouk and Hun Sen factions. There was never full agreement, however, and Hun Sen took over in a violent 1997 coup. The Khmer Rouge subsequently waned in power, and its former leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

In November 1998, a new coalition government was formed between the two leading parties, leading to relative political peace. Cambodia is now leaning toward a war crimes tribunal for Khmer Rouge perpetrators, but it still has not decided how to confront its vicious and bloody past and move forward.

The name *Cambodia* hardly evokes thoughts of ancient glory. To those of us born in the late 20th century, especially in the West, Cambodia suggests instead a history of oppression, civil war, genocide, drug running, and coups d'état. Constant political turbulence, armed citizenry, bandits, and war fallout, such as unexploded mines, have given the country a reputation as one of the world's most dangerous places to travel rather than a repository of man-made and natural wonders. It's important to have perspective on the country's troubled history in order to understand the present. Only then can we appreciate the current civil order and the fact that citizens have been or are being disarmed, and that Cambodia is making the slow push into this new century.

CAMBODIA TODAY

July 2003 elections went off without incident, but it took nearly a year for the negotiation of a government coalition. Hun Sen still reigns as prime minister, but ministries are shared with the royalists of FUNCINPEC. They face a dizzying backlog of legislation. In the fall of 2004, King Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's longtime standard-bearer through the many violent regime changes and trying times, abdicated, selecting his son Norodom Sihamoni, a retired ballet dancer, to take up the symbolic post of king. Meanwhile, work got under way in 2006 for a joint tribunal to bring justice to the former leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

The Asian Development bank predicts the annual growth rate to hover around 7% for 2009, driven mostly by garment exports, construction, and tourism, but the scene in rural Cambodia is bleak. Basic medical services are nonexistent; education and job training are out of reach for rural peasantry. International monitors and aid organizations look to the youthful population (some 60% under the age of 20), the survivors of and the next generation after genocide, to foster peace and productivity. The forecast is not good. The proliferation of new AIDS cases in Cambodia, and the inability to treat patients, is a major concern. Rural travel entails following safety precautions to the letter (see "Some Important Safety Tips," later) and staying abreast of the current political situation—instability being the hallmark—but know that the Cambodia of today is a much safer and saner land than only a few years ago. Our tourist dollars are a big reason why.

THE KHMER PEOPLE & CULTURE

The name *Cambodia* is an Angliciz ed v ersion of the F rench *Cambodge,* a bastar dized name of the nor thern I ndian tribe fr om which the Khmer ar e said to descend. Both citizens and language are alternately referred to as Khmer or Cambodian. Ninety percent of Cambodia's 14 million people ar e ethnic Khmer, the remainder a mix of ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, hill tribes, and a small pocket of Cham M uslims.

The countr y's histor y is a r oad map of incursions and inv asion. Cambodia is a geographic and cultural crossroads of the two powers, India and China, that shaped Southeast Asia and, more than any country in the region, reflects the French term *Indochine.* Khmer culture, like that of nearby Laos, is defined by Theravada Buddhism, but in other matters, one gets the distinct impr ession that Cambodia is still sear ching for its identity.

ETIQUETTE

Traditions and practices in Cambodia, like those in neighboring Thailand and Laos, are closely tied with Theravada Buddhism. Modest dress is expected of all visitors, and bar e midriffs or shor t shor ts are an offense to many and will cause a stir . Men and women should go easy on public displays of affection. As in all B uddhist countries, it is important to respect the space around Buddhist monks; women especially should avoid touching and even speaking to the men in orange r obes anywhere outside the temple.

In personal interaction, keep it light and friendly, especially when bargaining or handling any business affairs. I f Khmer people ar e confused, misunderstand, or ar e in disagreement, they do what many Westerners find inconceiv able: smile, nod, and agr ee while whole in the kno wledge that they will do something differ ent. This is difficult to understand, but tr y to remember that if y ou're angry and lots of people ar ound you are smiling, y ou're unlikely to hav e achiev ed y our desir ed aim (in shor t, y ou're doomed). Direct discourse is certainly not standard procedure here, and many Western visitors can feel cheated b y that misunderstanding. B e clear in what y ou expect fr om someone—whether a guide, a motorbike driver, or a business associate—and get firm affirmation of that fact. Listen closely to what comes after the *but* in "Yes, but . . ."

On the list of cultural no-nos, it's important to remember that the feet are considered dirty and that the head is sacred and pure. This means that even pointing the feet in the direction of another or stepping o ver someone, thus exposing the soles of the feet, is impolite. Touching someone's head, even tussling a child's hair, should be avoided.

Hospitality has its o wn elaborate r ules, and, like in any cultur e, it is impor tant to accept when possible, or comfor table, and to say thank y ou: *awk koun.*

Tips "Heritage Friendly" Establishments

Much of Cambodia's ancient history has been lost, thanks t o its violent past and the continued looting and trafficking of Khmer artifacts. To help prevent this, look for the "Heritage Friendly" logo. This logo was created by the Heritage Foundation (www.heritagewatch.org), an organization working to preserve Khmer antiquities and culture. The presence of the logo indicates that a business or organization has met certain standards that help protect Cambodian heritage. Travel to Cambodia is good, but responsible travel is even better.

LANGUAGE

The language of Cambodia is called either Cambodian or Khmer , a term that r efers to the ethnic majority of the countr y but is also used to describe all things Cambodian: Khmer people (the Khmer), Khmer food, and Khmer cultur e. The Khmer language belongs to the M on-Khmer family and is a deriv ative of S anskrit and Pali, the language spoken by Buddha. Unlike in neighboring Thailand and Laos, the Khmer language is not tonal and is thus more merciful to the casual learner. Basic pronunciation is still frustrating and difficult, though. Khmer script is based on a south I ndian model and is quite complex.

Khmer embraces many loaner words from French, Chinese, and now English, especially technical terms. Older Khmers still speak French, and young people are quite keen to learn and practice E nglish. I n the major tourist centers, speaking slo wly and clearly in basic English phrases will do the trick, but a fe w choice phrases in Khmer will get y ou far.

Useful Khmer Phrases

English	Khmer	Pronunciation
Hello	**Soa s'day**	Sew sadday
Goodbye	**Lia haoy**	Lee howie
Thank you	**Awk koun**	Awk coon
Thank you very much	**Awk koun chelan**	Awk coon chalan
How are you?	**Sohk sabai?**	Sook sabai?
I am fine	**Sohk sabai**	Sook sabai
Yes (man)	**Baat**	Baht
Yes (woman)	**Jaa**	Jya
No	**Ah te**	Ah tay
I'm sorry	**Sohm to**	Sum tow
Toilet?	**Bawngku uhn?** B	angku oon?
Do you have . . . ? (lit. do you have or don't you?)	**Men awt men?**	Mien ought mien?
Water?	**Tuhk sot?**	Took sawt?
How much?	**Th'lai pohnmaan?**	Tlai bawn mahn?
Can you make it cheaper?	**Som joh th'lai?**	Sum joe tlai?

2 THE BEST OF CAMBODIA IN 1 WEEK

Cambodia's Angkor Wat temple complex could occupy y ou for a full w eek. But there is more to Cambodia than those old stones, and in just 7 days you can get a good sampling of this tragic, enigmatic countr y.

Day 1: Siem Reap

Many carriers fly to Siem Reap, and you'll want to star t y our trip her e. Check into the **Shinta M ani,** a quaint r esort that helps train underprivileged Cambodians and pr ovides ex cellent ser vice along the

way. Take a tuk-tuk to the temples and pick up your 3-day pass. Enter for sunset at **Ta Prohm Kel,** a small hilltop temple near Angkor Wat. Return to town for dinner at **Viroth's,** which serves inexpensive, authentic Khmer food.

Days ❷–❸: Angkor Wat ★★★

Devote your first day to the outer temples and sites. Stop by the **Blue Pumpkin** to pick up sandwiches for a picnic lunch; then take a rented car to **Kabal Spean** for a small hike through the forest to a river whose bedrock has been carved into many Hindu reliefs. The water is blessed by these carvings before running into Angkor. On your return from this revered site, stop at **Banteay Srei,** a temple of pink stone. Return to Siem Reap and dine at the **Red Piano,** a restaurant made famous by Angelina Jolie during her filming of *Tomb Raider.* Wake early the following morning to watch the sun rise over Angkor Wat. Spend the day roaming the temples (you'll want to hire a tuk-tuk driver in town for this). Take your time at **Ta Prohm, Angkor Thom,** and the **Bayon,** but also explore some of the smaller temples. Save the best for last: **Angkor Wat.** Allow plenty of time for this one, as the details carved in stone here can be captivating. Have a hearty dinner on the outside patio of the **FCC** (Foreign Correspondents Club).

Day ❹: Phnom Penh

Take a morning flight from Siem Reap to the capital, Phnom Penh. Stay at the **Raffles Hotel Le Royal,** a colonial-era hotel that has retained much of its class. Spend some time strolling along the riverfront on **Sisowath Quay.** Then check out the **National Museum,** the **Silver Pagoda,** and **Tuol Sleng, Museum of Genocide.** Each of these will give you a clearer picture of the tragedies that have befallen this nation. Have dinner at the **FCC** and watch as night falls over the confluence of the Sap and Mekong rivers.

Days ❺–❻: Kep ★★★

Kep is Cambodia's best-kept secret. A small beach town, Kep can be reached by an early morning bus out of Phnom Penh; the ride will give you a feel for Cambodian rural life. Stay at the **Veranda Natural Resort** in a hillside bungalow overlooking the Gulf of Thailand. Take a swim and try some crab at one of the little restaurants on the beachfront. Hop a morning bus to Phnom Penh and an evening flight to Siem Reap the next day.

Day ❼: Siem Reap

Save the last day for shopping at the **Old Market** and the stores that flank it. Look for silk and sculpture as well as souvenirs. Fly out in the evening with your bags laden with gifts for grateful friends.

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO CAMBODIA

VISITOR INFORMATION

You'll find a wealth of information at **www.gocambodia.com**, or click on "Cambodia" at **www.visit-mekong.com**. The Cambodian Embassy to the U.S. sponsors **www.embassyofcambodia.org**. Below are Cambodian embassy and consulate locations overseas.

- **In the U.S.:** 4530 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20011 (✆ **202/726-7742;** fax 202/726-8381; www.embassy.org); or 866 United Nations Plaza, Ste. 420, New York, NY 10017 (✆ **212/223-0676;** fax 212/223-0425).
- **In Australia/New Zealand:** 5 Canterbury Crescent, Deakin, ACT 2600, Canberra (✆ **02/6273-1259;** fax 02/6273-1053; www.embassyofcambodia.org.nz).
- **In Thailand:** No. 185 Rajdammri Rd., Lumpini Patumwan, Bangkok 10330, Thailand (✆ **02/254-6630;** fax 02/253-9859).

ORGANIZED TOURS & TRAVEL AGENTS

Many visitors choose to see Cambodia with the convenience of a guided tour, which is a good idea: It's not only safer and easier, but also means that you won't miss the finer details of what you're seeing and can visit rural Cambodia in as much comfort as possible. Being part of a larger group tour is a good, affordable option. Even if you travel independently, you might want to sign up with a local tour operator (like Diethelm or Exotissimo, below) once you're in Cambodia. Below are recommended tour operators that offer Cambodia excursions.

International

- **Abercrombie & Kent,** 1520 Kensington Rd., Ste. 212, Oakbrook, IL 60523-2141 (✆ **800/554-7016** or 630/954-2944; fax 630/954-3324; www.aandktours.com).
- **Asia Transpacific Journeys,** 2995 Center Green Court, Boulder, CO 80301 (✆ **800/642-2742** or 303/443-6789; fax 303/443-7078; www.asiatranspacific.com).

Regional

- **Diethelm Travel,** House #65, St. 240, P.O. Box 99, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/219-151;** fax 023/219-150; www.diethelmtravel.com), or House #4, Road #6, Krum #1, Sangkat #2, Phum Taphul, Siem Reap (✆ **063/963-524;** fax 063/963-694).
- **Exotissimo Travel,** SSN Center, 66 Norodom Blvd., 6th Floor, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/218-948;** fax 023/426-586; www.exotissimo.com), or 300 Airport Road N.6, Siem Reap (✆ **063/964-323;** fax 063/963-621).

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

All visitors are required to carry a passport and visa. A 1-month visa can be issued on arrival at the Phnom Penh or Siem Reap airports for about $20 (£13), and an overland visa-upon-arrival is available from both Thailand (overland from Poipet) and Vietnam (by boat from Chau Doc or by bus through Moc Bai) for $22 (£15). Bring two passport photos for your application or be prepared to pay a few extra dollars. For other entry points, you must obtain your visa before arrival. There is an overland crossing between Laos and Cambodia via Stung Treng, but it is a trip reserved only for the hearty.

Tourist visas can be extended three times for a total of 3 months. Any travel agent can perform the service for a small fee. Business visas, for just $25 (£17) upon entry, can be extended indefinitely.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

For visitors 18 and older, allowable amounts of goods when entering are as follows: 200 cigarettes or the equivalent quantity of tobacco; one opened bottle of liquor; and a reasonable amount of perfume for personal use. Currency in possession must be declared on arrival. Cambodian Customs on the whole is not stringent. Due to a long, sad history of theft from the Angkor temples, it is forbidden to carry antiques or Buddhist reliquaries out of the country, but Buddhist statues and trinkets bought from souvenir stalls are fine.

MONEY

Cambodia's official currency is the **riel,** but the Cambodian economy is tied to the fate of its de facto currency, the **U.S. dollar.** Greenbacks can be used anywhere. The exchange rate at the time of publication was **4,190 riel = $1.** Prices for all but the smallest purchases are in U.S. dollars and are listed as thus in this chapter. The **Thai baht** is also widely accepted in the western region of the country.

It's important to have riel for smaller purchases, but there is no point in exchanging large amounts of foreign currency into the local scrap. You'll commonly receive small change in riel as well. The riel comes in denominations of 100, 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 50,000, and 100,000. You cannot change Cambodia's riel outside the country, so anything you carry home is a souvenir.

ATMS ATMs are now available at major banks in both Siem Reap and Phnom Penh.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE You can change traveler's checks in banks in all major towns. Because the U.S. dollar is the de facto currency, it's not a bad idea to change traveler's checks to dollars for a 1% or 2% fee and make all purchases in U.S. cash.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Traveler's checks are accepted in most major banks for exchange, but not commonly at individual vendors. American Express is a good bet and is represented by **Diethelm** (see "Organized Tours & Travel Agents," above).

CREDIT CARDS Cambodia has a cash economy, but credit cards are becoming more widely accepted. Most large hotels and high-end restaurants accept the majors, but you'll want to carry cash for the majority of transactions—and certainly in the countryside.

WHEN TO GO

CLIMATE Cambodia's climate falls under the pattern of the southern monsoons that also hit neighboring Thailand and Vietnam from May to November. There is little seasonal temperature variation, meaning that it's always hot (a yearly mean of about 82°F/28°C). The best time to go is in the dry season from December to April.

CLOTHING CONSIDERATIONS Keep it light and loose; it's always hot. "Less is more" applies here; bulky luggage is an albatross in Cambodia. Loose, long-sleeved shirts and long pants are recommended. Cotton is the best choice, and long trousers are better than shorts. First, long pants are the best way to fend off mosquitoes. Second, culturally, shorts are worn by children, not adults (although long shorts are more accepted, especially for young men), and for women only rarely (with sporting events being the exception). A wide-brimmed hat is essential protection from the sun, and some even carry an umbrella to be used either as a parasol or as cover from sporadic rains. Sandals are acceptable in most arenas, but shoes are a better idea, given some of the tumbledown qualities of most areas in the country.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS **Khmer New Year** is in the middle of April. The **Angkor Festival** is held at the end of July. **King Sihanouk's Birthday** is October 31. **Independence Day** is November 9 (1953) and is celebrated throughout the country like the American Fourth of July. There are water festivals and boat races at the end of November, including a huge festival in Phnom Penh.

HEALTH & SAFETY

DRUGS Cambodia is one of the world's biggest producers of cannabis—not to mention heroin, amphetamines, and other substances—and peddlers abound. You might be tempted to buy or sample substances offered, but if caught, you could face a lengthy jail sentence, which is guaranteed to be uncomfortable. Enough said.

HEALTH CONCERNS See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for information on health concerns and general issues that affect the region. Remember that no tap water in Cambodia is considered potable, so stick with bottled water. It's also a good idea to check the most recent information at the **Centers for Disease Control** (click "Travelers' Health" at **www.cdc.gov**).

Tips Some Important Safety Tips

- Remember that the police and military of Cambodia are not there to protect and serve. Any interaction with the constabulary usually results in frustration and/or your coming away short a few dollars. Contact your embassy for major problems, and call for police assistance only in cases of theft or extreme danger. Demand a ticket if threatened with a fine of any sort (although often, especially for small traffic infractions, it's best to just cough up a buck or two).
- Women should take extra caution in Cambodia, as recent years have seen an increase in sexual assaults on foreign women, in both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap and even in the Angkor temple complex. Don't travel alone, and try not to isolate yourself in areas around the temples.
- Rural travel is really opening up, and you'll find a hearty welcome in even the most remote hamlet, but roads are rough and travel of any distance is best done in an off-road conveyance with a sturdy suspension: Motorbikes or four-wheel-drive trucks are best. Know, too, that you're really on your own out in the sticks, with no hospitals and limited support services available.
- Especially at night, travelers should stay aware, just as they would in any big city. Purse snatching is not uncommon in Phnom Penh, and pickpockets are as proficient here as anywhere in the region, so take care.
- Land mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) can be found in rural areas in Cambodia, but especially in Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Pursat, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom provinces. Don't walk in heavily forested spots or in dry rice paddies without a local guide. Areas around small bridges on secondary roads are particularly dangerous.

Health considerations should comprise a good part of your trip planning for Cambodia, even if you're going for only a few weeks. If rural areas are on your itinerary, you'll need to get special vaccinations far enough in advance to give them time to take effect. If you follow the guidelines here and those of your doctor, there's no reason you can't have a safe and healthy trip.

Malaria is not a concern in Phnom Penh and any of the larger towns, but upcountry and even in and around Siem Reap and Angkor Wat, it's quite common. Many travelers take preventative medication. An **antimalarial prophylaxis** is recommended everywhere but in Phnom Penh. Take atovaquone proguanil (brand name Malarone), doxycycline, or mefloquine (brand name Lariam). If you plan to travel extensively in the rural areas on the western border with Thailand, primaquine is the only effective preventative.

Other mosquito-borne ailments, such as **Japanese encephalitis** and **dengue fever,** are also prevalent. Your best protection is to wear light, loose-fitting clothes from wrist to neck and ankles; use a bug repellent with DEET; and be particularly careful at sunset or when out and about early in the morning.

Hepatitis is a concern, as it is anywhere. Reliable statistics on **AIDS** are not out, but with rampant prostitution and drug abuse, Cambodia is certainly fertile ground for the

Warning! Medical Safety & Evacuation Insurance

The Cambodian medical system is rudimentary at best and nonexistent at worst. Make sure that you have medical coverage for overseas travel and that it includes emergency evacuation. For more information on insurance, see p. 35. There are a few clinics in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, but for anything major, evacuation to Bangkok is the best option.

disease. Recent efforts to educate needle users about the dangers of substance abuse and the importance of clean needles, as well as increased condom use, are positive signs, but statistics show that the tide of new AIDS cases is still rising.

SAFETY CONCERNS It is recommended that you check with your home country's overseas travel bureau or with the **U.S. State Department** (click "Travel Warnings" at **www.travel.state.gov**) to keep abreast of travel advisories and current affairs that could affect your trip.

If you encounter problems during your visit, go to your country's embassy. Addresses for embassies in Phnom Penh are listed under "Fast Facts: Cambodia" (p. 399).

The days of the Khmer Rouge taking backpackers hostage are long gone, and the general lawlessness and banditry that marked Cambodia as inaccessible and dangerous only a short time ago has abated. Gun-toting thugs, once a common sight in any town, have been disarmed. Old habits die hard, however, and in general travelers should take caution. Poverty in rural areas breeds desperation and a volatile climate.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE International flights to Cambodia from neighboring countries are numerous and affordable. Cambodia's two main hubs, **Siem Reap International Airport** and **Phnom Penh International Airport,** are served by the following: **Bangkok Airways** from Thailand; **Malaysia Airlines** from Kuala Lumpur; **Lao Airways** from Vientiane; **Vietnam Airways** from Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi; **Silk Air** from Singapore; and **EVA Air** from Taipei. **Shanghai Air, President,** and **China Southern** provide connections between Phnom Penh and points in China. There is a $25 (£17) international departure tax.

BY BUS Pickup trucks and limited bus service connect with Poi Pet, near Thailand, a journey that is like crossing the craters of the moon—you'll come away exhausted and caked with dust. This trip is recommended only for the rough and ready. Arriving from Vietnam, private minibuses and taxis can be chartered from the border near Moc Bai to Phnom Penh. The ride is bumpy but manageable, though flying in or out of Phnom Penh or Siem Reap is recommended.

BY BOAT There are daily boats between Phnom Penh and Vietnam's border town, Chau Doc. From Vietnam, contact the **Victoria Chau Doc Hotel** (✆ **076/865-010**) for expensive, private services, or one of the traveler cafes, such as **Sinh Café** (✆ **08/836-7338**), for a budget trip. From Phnom Penh, make arrangements through any hotel or travel agent.

GETTING AROUND

BY PLANE Connection between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap is frequent and regular on **President Air** and **Siem Reap Airways.** There is a $6 (£4) domestic departure tax in

both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Local carrier PMT connects Sihanoukville to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, but service remains unreliable.

BY BUS Most travelers find local buses rough going in the extreme. Contact the folks at an old travelers' standby, **Capitol Tour** (#14 AEO, Rd. 182, Sangkat Beng Prolitt; ✆ **023/217-627**), for inexpensive seat-in-coach connections and tours throughout the country. **Ho Wah Genting Transport Company** (Rd. 67, just west of the Central Market, Phnom Penh; ✆ **023/210-859**) provides service between Siem Reap and Phnom Penh for just 25,000 riel ($5.95/£3.95). **Mekong Express** (102 Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh; ✆ **023/427-518**) connects Phnom Penh and Siem Reap with daily luxury (well, air-conditioned) buses for just $11 (£7.30).

BY CAR/MOTORBIKE Hiring a car with a driver, driving yourself, or going by rented motorbike is a great way to see Cambodia's rural highways and byways. Rough country roads mean that you'll need to rent the most durable of vehicles, with good suspension. Hiring a driver is smart, too. Contact a travel agent or your hotel for recommendations. A reputable driver trusted by aid workers and journalists is a man named **Bon Thim** (✆ **092/800-128**).

BY BOAT Speedboats make the 5-hour trip between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. The cost is $35 (£23); any hotel can arrange a ticket. Boats leave from the pier near the Japanese Bridge in the north end of town or connect with Siem Reap's Tonle Sap docks by taxi.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

The only quality accommodations that you'll find are in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, but their standards are high. Some budget options are updating themselves and turning into rustic boutique properties. Be warned that accommodations often fill up in the winter high season, especially at the finer hotels near Angkor Wat. There is a 10% VAT charge at most hotels. Expect discounts in the low season.

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Cambodia:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Cambodia's country code **(855),** the city code (**23** for Phnom Pehn, **63** for Siem Reap), and the six-digit phone number (for example, 011 855 23 000-000). ***Important note:*** Omit the initial "0" in all Cambodian phone numbers when calling from abroad.
- **To place a call within Cambodia:** Dial the city or area code preceded by a **0** (the way numbers are listed in this book), and then the local number (for example, 023 000-000). Note that all phone numbers are six digits after the city code.
- **To place a direct international call from Cambodia:** To place a call, dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Laos, 856; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

TIPS ON DINING

In this old French colony, the cuisine is heavily French, all affordable, and often quite good. There's also good Thai, and tourist centers are chockablock with storefronts that serve up reasonable facsimiles of Western favorites.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

There are lots of antiques stores and boutiques in the major tourist centers, but shopping for trinkets and memorabilia is best at the big markets: the Russian Market and Central Market in Phnom Penh, and the Old Market in Siem Reap.

Fast Facts Cambodia

American Express For basic American Express services (such as reporting lost checks) contact **Diethelm Travel,** House #65, St. 240, P.O. Box 99, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/219-151;** www.diethelmtravel.com).

Business Hours Vendors and restaurants tend to be all-day operations, opening at about 8am and closing at 9 or 10pm. Government offices, banks, travel agencies, and museums are usually open from 8am to 4 or 5pm, with an hour break for lunch.

Drug & Liquor Laws There is no minimum legal drinking age in Cambodia. When it comes to drugs, however, availability can look like permission, but it's often not the case. It's said that you can bribe your way out of (or into) anything in corrupt Cambodia, but it's best not to test that theory. Police are crooked and may be the ones who sell (out of uniform) in order to collect the bribe. Like anywhere, dabbling in this arena makes you friends in all the wrong places, and Cambodia is not a good place to have the wrong friends.

Electricity Cambodia runs on 220-volt European standard electricity, with rounded, two-prong plugs. If you're coming from the U.S., bring an adapter, as well as a surge protector for delicate gadgets.

Embassies **U.S.:** #1, St. 96, Sangkat Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/728-000;** http://cambodia.usembassy.gov). **U.K.:** #27–29, St. 75, Sangkat Srah Chak, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/427-124;** http://ukincambodia.fco.gov.uk/en). **Australia:** #11, St. 254, Rue Vithei Senei Vannavaut Oum, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/213-470;** www.cambodia.embassy.gov.au). The Australian embassy also assists nationals of Canada and New Zealand.

Emergencies In Phnom Penh, dial ✆ **117** for police, ✆ **119** for an ambulance.

Hospitals You'll want to take care of any medical or dental issues before arriving in Cambodia. The **SOS Clinic** in Phnom Penh, #161 St. 51 (✆ **023/216-911**), is your best bet in a pinch.

Internet Access Reliable service can be found in the major centers, with prepaid wireless connections a recent innovation.

Language The Cambodian language is Khmer, an amalgam of ancient Sanskrit and Pali. English and French are spoken widely, as is Mandarin. See "Language," p. 392, for more information.

Mail Hotels usually sell stamps and send postcards for guests. See specific cities for locations of post offices.

Police Khmer police exist to harass and collect, not to protect and serve. Contact them only in the event of a major emergency, by calling ✆ **117.** Otherwise call your embassy.

Safety Once a place where violence and banditry were an everyday occurrence, Cambodia has become much safer in recent years. The civilian population is more or less disarmed and civil authorities have firm control, but stay on your toes. It's best not to be out on the roads too late at night. Beware of unexploded bombs and mines in rural areas. Also remember to lock valuables in hotel safes. In the event of trouble, comply and report any incidents to local officials. See "Health & Safety," p. 36, for more information.

Telephones The international country code for Cambodia is **855.** Phones in the major centers are reliable, and international direct dial is common—for a price. Most hotels levy exorbitant surcharges of 10% to 25%. See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 398, for details.

Time Zone Cambodia is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, in the same zone as Bangkok. It is 12 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time during the winter months, and 3 hours behind Sydney.

Tipping Tipping is not obligatory, but it is appreciated. A blanket 10% to 20% is exorbitant. It's best to just round up the check, or leave a buck or so.

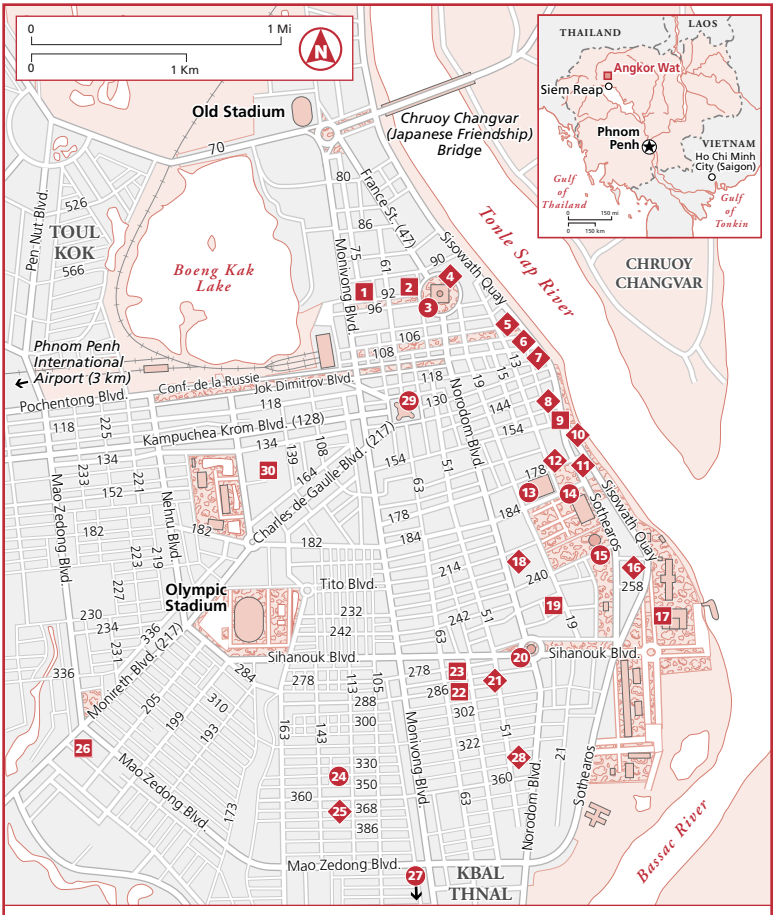
Toilets Public toilets are a little rough. Many are the Asian-style "squatty-potty" variety, rather grungy with an attendant at the door charging a small fee for entrance and a few squares of gritty paper. It's not a bad idea to bring your own toilet paper and antibacterial lotion. Facilities in Western accommodations will be more familiar.

Water No tap water is potable. Buy bottled water, which is widely available.

4 PHNOM PENH

Founded in the mid–14th century by the Khmers as a monastery, Phnom Penh replaced Angkor Thom a century later as the country's capital. The city has long been a vital trading hub at the confluence of three rivers: the Mekong, Tonle Sap, and Bassac. The city's most dramatic history was when it lay vacant; following an eviction order from Pol Pot, the city was deserted in a period of hours. Almost all of Phnom Penh's residents moved to the countryside in 1975, not to return until 1979 under the authority of Vietnamese troops.

It has been a long road to the peaceful and growing Phnom Penh of today. There were many years of frontier-style anarchy after the city was repopulated in 1979. Drugs and prostitution are still big downtown commodities, but it's unlikely that you'll be caught in the crossfire, something you couldn't say 4 or 5 years ago. Today, Phnom Penh enjoys its own kind of harmony of opposites. Visitors are offered peaceful moments like a sunset at riverside, as well as dusty, motorbike-choked labyrinthine alleys and cacophonous markets. The city is an incongruous cluster of crumbling French colonials, and the central riverside area has a pace all its own that's great for wandering.



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There's also much of historical interest in Phnom Penh. Its **Royal Palace** is a stone showpiece of classical Khmer architecture, and the **Silver Pagoda,** on the palace grounds, is a jewel-encrusted wonder. Throughout the city, you'll see the faded glory of aged **French colonial architecture.** There are also many notable *wats,* Buddhist temples with resident monks.

Of more grisly interest is the **Tuol Sleng,** or Museum of Genocide, a schoolhouse-turned-prison where up to 20,000 victims of Pol Pot's excesses were tortured before being led to the **Choeung Ek,** otherwise known as the Killing Fields, about 16km (10 miles) from Phnom Penh. It's a town certainly worth exploring for a few days.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE All major airlines in the region connect here. **Phnom Penh International Airport** is just a 15-minute drive from the city center. A cab costs $7 (£4.65), a ride on the back of a motorbike just $2 (£1.30). Buy tickets from the taxi stand outside the departure terminal under the archway to your left.

BY BOAT Speedboats connect with Siem Reap and leave every morning from the main dock on the north end of town. Tickets are available just about anywhere in town. The price is $35 (£23) from most hotels or the Capitol Guesthouse (see below).

BY BUS Buses connect with neighboring Vietnam and points throughout the country. From Vietnam, contact **Saigontourist** (✆ **08/824-4554**) or **Sinh Café** (✆ **08/836-7338**). To get from Cambodia to Vietnam, ask at any travel agent, hotel, or the Capitol Guesthouse (see below). A tourist bus to Siem Reap takes 6 to 7 hours and costs $17 (£11). **Ho Wah Genting Transport Company** (✆ **023/210-859**), with an office just west of the Central Market, sells tickets to all the major stops and minor hamlets in the country. **Mekong Express** (p. 398) has daily connections to Siem Reap on an air-conditioned bus for $11 (£7.30).

GETTING AROUND

Phnom Penh's downtown is accessible on foot, and it's easy to find your way because the streets are arranged in a numbered grid. For sites farther afield, such as the Killing Fields or any temples, you'll need wheels. Metered taxis are everywhere in town, and any hotel can arrange daily car rental (with driver). Or contact the folks at **Lucky! Lucky!** (413 Monivong Blvd.; ✆ **023/212-788**), who rent high-quality motorbikes for rural touring (available for long-term rental) as well as jeeps and even luxury cars.

Motorcycle taxis, also called **motordups,** can be hired anywhere and cost about 4,000 riel (95¢/60p) for short trips in town. Bargain hard. These guys are everywhere, especially on the riverside, and the competition is in your favor. Add a tip, and you'll have a friend for life.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Deluxe

- **Diethelm Travel,** House #65, St. 240, P.O. Box 99, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/219-151;** fax 023/219-150; www.diethelmtravel.com), or House #4, Road #6, Krum #1, Sangkat #2, Phum Taphul, Siem Reap (✆ **063/963-524;** fax 063/963-694).
- **Exotissimo Travel,** #46, Norodom Blvd., Phnom Penh (✆ **023/218-948;** fax 023/426-586; www.exotissimo.com).

Budget

- **Capitol Guesthouse Tours,** #14 AEO, Road 182, Sangkat Beng Prolitt (✆ **023/217-627**). This is the town's budget travel cafe and a good place to arrange inexpensive rural and local tours and onward connections by bus and boat. Remember that you get what you pay for, but the services are convenient.
- Small tour operators and ticket shops abound along Sisowath. For flights and other services, try **K.U. Travel & Tours** (#77, St. 240; ✆ **023/723-456;** fax 023/427-425; www.kucambodia.com) in the cafe and gallery area.

Fast Facts Phnom Penh

American Express For basic American Express services (such as reporting lost checks), contact **Diethelm Travel,** House #65, St. 240, P.O. Box 99, Phnom Penh (✆ **023/219-151;** www.diethelmtravel.com).

Currency Exchange **ANZ Bank** offers comprehensive bank services and has reliable international ATMs in town, the most convenient ones being at the riverside branch, 265 Sisowath Quay (✆ **023-999-000**). **Canadia Bank,** #265, St. 114 (✆ **023/215-286**), and **Mekong Bank,** #1, St. 114 (✆ **023/217-112**), are among many banks in the downtown area that can cash traveler's checks and give cash advances. There is also a **Western Union** office at Cambodia Asia Bank (✆ **023/210-900**), in the Naga, a floating casino behind the Cambodiana Hotel.

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **117;** for fire, dial ✆ **118.**

Hospitals The **International SOS Medical and Dental Clinic,** #161, St. 51 (✆ **023/216-911**), is the best place for minor emergencies. **Naga Clinic ,** #11, St. 254 (✆ **011/811-175**), is another. For any major emergency or injury, however, you'll want to arrange medical evacuation.

Internet Access Internet outlets line the riverside Sisowath Street. Hourly access starts at $1 (65p). **Friendly Web,** near Capitol Guesthouse, has good access from its office at #199 EO, St. 107 (✆ **012/843-246**), at the corner of Road 182. **Sunny Internet Cafe,** 351 Sisowath Quay (✆ **023-986-629**), has several flatscreen computers with fast ADSL connections in a bright location.

Mail The post office is located in the north end of town on Street 13, east of Wat Phnom. It's open daily from 6:30am to 5pm, and has standard delivery service and an international phone. **DHL** has an office at House 353, Street 110 (✆ **023/427-726**). **FedEx** is at #701D Monivong Rd. (✆ **023/216-712**).

Telephones The local code for Phnom Penh is **23.** International direct dialing is available in most hotels and at the post office. Storefront Internet cafes along Sisowath offer inexpensive Internet calls or direct dialing. Cellphones are very popular in the city, and you'll find street-side stalls on wheels where you can make local and international calls for next to nothing, with a good cellular connection.

WHERE TO STAY

There are some choice hotels in town, from old, upscale gems to budget minihotels and even a few small boutique properties. I recommend spending a little more for bargain

 luxury, as the midrange properties of Phnom Penh are run-down, at best. Always ask about seasonal rates. Some hotels charge a 10% VAT.

Very Expensive

Hotel InterContinental Phnom Penh ★★ The InterContinental is the place for business travelers. This luxury behemoth has every amenity and in-room convenience, from wireless and in-room Internet to fine fitness, health, and beauty services. The downside is the location; the self-contained hotel is pretty far from the city's action. Rooms are done with tidy carpet, dark-wood furnishings, patterned couches, striped raw-silk curtains that match the spreads on the king-size beds, and marble detailing in the entryways. Everything is large and luxe, and beds are fluffy and comfortable. Well-appointed bathrooms have separate showers and tubs with Art Deco faucets. Oak desks and floor-to-ceiling windows give guests that "power broker" feel (even if you're just a small fish). The large outdoor pool has a kitschy Angkor Wat water park theme to it (a red stone fountain of three elephant heads is the centerpiece), but there's an elegant water-level bar. Dining is fine Chinese and Western. The lobby is pure marble opulence, dotted with gold columns. Staff is super efficient and professional.

Regency Sq., 296 Blvd. Mao Tse Toung, P.O. Box 2288, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/424-888.** Fax 023/424-885. www.intercontinental.com. 372 units. $300 (£200) deluxe room; $600 (£400) junior suite; $800 (£533) executive suite. Seasonal and Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 snack bars; bar; outdoor pool; great fitness center; sauna; children's playroom; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, safe.

Raffles Hotel Le Royal ★★ Built in 1929, this is Phnom Penh's most atmospheric hotel, an authentic Art Deco and colonial classic. This hotel reopened and expanded with a new wing in 1997, and everything from the vaulted ceilings in the lobby to the classic original central stairs breathes history and charm. Rooms are done with fine tiled entries, high ceilings, indirect lighting, a sitting area with inlaid furniture, and ornate touches such as antique wall sconces and fine drapery. The scale is large but not imposing. Landmark rooms, just one step above the standard, are a good choice in the older building and are larger, with nice appointments including claw-foot tubs. It's luxury with a price tag, but it's worth it. There are also some interesting theme suites named for famous visitors, including Stamford Raffles. Even Jacqueline Kennedy has a room dedicated to photos and memorabilia of her 1967 visit. The central pool area is a tranquil oasis divided by a pavilion, and the amenities throughout, such as the fine massage facility, are luxe. The staff is very professional.

92 Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh (off Monivong Blvd.), Sangkat Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/981-888.** Fax 023/981-168. www.phnompenh.raffles.com. 170 units. $300–$340 (£200–£227) double; $390–$2,500 (£260–£1,667) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 2 outdoor pools; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Hotel Cambodiana ★★ The Cambodiana nearly has it all. With a convenient location, atmosphere, and all the amenities, this is a good jumping-off point for the sights downtown. The building looks like a giant gilded wedding cake, and its vaulted Khmer-style roofs dominate the sky in the southern end of downtown. The lobby is abuzz with activity, whether it's visiting dignitaries or disembarking tour buses, but the helpful staff handles it all with grace. The large riverside pool is great, and there are some fine choices

in international dining. All rooms have picture windows and good views of town or the river. They're priced according to their view of the river, and executive floors are maintained to high standards. Everything is tidy, but the decor is a chain-hotel style in plain wood and office carpeting; it's a bit dull, and some floors reek of pungent deodorizers. Deluxe riverview rooms are your best bet. The high-end suites are richly decorated and the executive privileges on the top floors are luxe. Wireless Internet access (with prepaid cards) is available in all public spaces.

313 Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/426-288.** Fax 023/426-392. www.hotelcambodiana.com. 235 units. $150 (£100) deluxe; $250 (£167) suite; $350 (£233) executive. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; tennis court; small health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; concierge; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; limited room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe.

Sunway Hotel ★★ The Sunway is a very comfortable high-end choice. Just west of Wat Phnom in the north end of town, the facade and entry are grand, and the small wrought-iron chandelier suspended in the cool marble of the lobby completes the fine effect. The staff snaps to and is courteous even when busy. The Sunway covers all the bases for amenities, with a good health club and large downstairs salon and massage area. The dining room and laid-back lobby lounge are stylish and inviting. Rooms are chain-hotel bland, but large, clean, and very comfortable, with white walls, carpeting with a tight geometric design, and wooden valances. They have a good feel—though they could do without the bad "hotel art." Bathrooms are large, with combination tub/showers and granite counters.

#1, St. 92, Sangkat Wat Phnom, P.O. Box 633, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/430-333.** Fax 023/430-339. www.phnompenh.sunwayhotels.com. 138 units. $140–$170 (£93–£113) deluxe; $280–$850 (£187–£567) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; bar/lounge (w/live entertainment on Sat); health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam room; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe.

Moderate

Amanjaya Pancam Hotel ★★ Riverside at Sisowath Quay, this three-story corner building is a true house of style. The porous laterite walls of the lobby, the same stone used in Angkor, and Buddhist statues throughout contribute to a cool boutique vibe. Though sparse in services and amenities, the rooms are spacious, done in rich red silk hangings and bedspreads that contrast boldly with the dark-wood trim and floors. All units have king-size beds. The suites are enormous and worth the extra outlay. Bathrooms are immaculate affairs done in wood and tile, with neat tub/shower units in standard rooms and a separate shower and tub in suites, delineated by unique stone paths in concrete. Accommodations vary in size and shape, with the corner suites the best, offering panoramic views of the river and busy street below. Noisy traffic is the only drawback.

#1, St. 154, Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/214-747.** Fax 023/219-545. www.amanjaya.com. 21 units. High season $155–$265 (£103–£177) double; low season $115–$225 (£77–£150) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe.

Juliana Hotel ★ The Thai-owned and -managed Juliana is a good distance from the center of town and popular with both group tours and regional businessmen. Rooms are situated around a luxuriant central pool shaded by palms and with a terrace and lounge chairs: a bright spot in another wise dull landscape. Standard rooms aren't especially attractive, with their aging red carpeting and the nicks and scrapes of heavy use. That

said, superior and deluxe rooms are large and well appointed, with tidy carpet and light-wood trim. Regal headboards top the large beds, and there are nice rattan furnishings throughout. Be sure to request a nonsmoking room—and check it out before checking in. Calling itself a "city resort" isn't quite accurate, but the Continental restaurant is inviting and the pool is a standout, even if the rooms don't quite pass muster.

16 Juliana 152 Rd., Sangkat Vealvong, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/366-070-72** or 023/880-530-31. Fax 023/366-070-72. www.julianacambodia.com. 97 units. $80 (£53) superior; $100 (£67) deluxe; $110 (£73) executive; $200 (£133) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; small lobby bar; outdoor pool; small health club; sauna; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; salon; room service (5am–11pm); large massage complex; babysitting; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge.

The Pavilion ★★ (Value) This hotel is your best choice in this price range. The Pavilion is a renovated former royal residence tucked away on a quiet street overlooking a nearby pagoda and the Royal Palace. Walk through large wooden doors and white stone walls into the central oasis of gardens, four-poster daybeds with mosquito nets, and an inviting outdoor pool. Rooms are ultra chic, especially given their price tags. Furniture is made from sugar palm wood and hot water is provided by rooftop solar panels. Rooms on the second floor have lovely views of traditional rooftops and neighboring colonial houses. A few rooms in the new building have private pools.

Note: Families, head to this group's new development, the **Kabiki.** The kid-friendly hotel has a shallow outdoor pool and bunk beds. Doubles range from $50 to $80 (£33–£53).

227 St. 19. ✆ **023/222-280** or 012/344-258. www.pavilion-cambodia.com. 20 units. High season $75–$90 (£50–£60) double, $100 (£67) suite/private poolroom; low season $60–$70 (£40–£47) double, $85 (£57) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; free Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, free Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge.

Inexpensive

Golden Gate Hotel The standard rooms here are basic but clean and quite livable. The Golden Gate also has deluxe rooms that are larger but just as plain. This is a popular spot for long-staying expat business visitors and NGO folks, as the suites, with kitchenette and small living room, are like one-room apartments. Accommodations are outfitted in either tile or office-style carpeting and have mismatched but tidy upholstered and rattan furniture. Bathrooms are the small shower-in-room type typical of guesthouses. The best choice is a deluxe room on a higher floor (with view). Be sure to ask to see the room first, as they really vary.

#9, St. 278, Sangkat (just south of the Independence Monument), Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/7211-161.** Fax 023/721-005. www.goldengatehotels.com. $28 (£19) standard; $35 (£23) deluxe; $45 (£30) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; car rental; business center w/Internet access; limited room service; laundry. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Goldiana ★★ A labyrinthine complex, the result of many construction phases, the Goldiana is one of the best budget choices in the Cambodian capital. The hotel is just south of the Victory Monument and a short ride from the main sights. It's low-level luxe but squeaky clean. Rooms are very large, with either carpeting or wood flooring. The hotel's standard of maintenance, unlike that of similar properties in town, is meticulous. Although that new-car smell is long gone, rooms are low on the mildew and musty odors commonly found at the in-town competition. Bathrooms are small but comfortable, with a tub/shower combo and granite tile. The third-floor pool is a real bonus in this category. The lobby is a designer muddle of heavy curtains, large pottery with fake flowers, mirrors, and bright-colored carved wood, but it acquires a certain appeal once it

becomes familiar. The staff is kind and helpful and is used to the questions and concerns of long-staying patrons, tourists, and business clients. Even guests on short stays, however, will be made to feel at home.

#10–12, St. 282, Sangkat Boeng Keng Kang I, Phnom Penh. ✆ **023/219-558.** Fax 023/219-558. www.goldiana.com. 148 units. $48 (£32) double; $68–$108 (£45–£72) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor rooftop pool; basic gym; car rental; courtesy car; business center w/Internet access; room service (6am–10pm); laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge.

Budget

Affordable accommodations abound in the Cambodian capital, but they can be a bit rough—thin-walled cacophony, bad smells, surly proprietors, and poor security are the hallmarks. In and around Sisowath Quay, the busy riverside boulevard, you'll find mini-hotels and budget lodging of all kinds starting at about $10 (£5.50) per night. The eastern shore of the **Boeung Kak Lake,** just north of town, is also a popular backpacker ghetto. It's cheap sleeps and eats with no frills (or nothing even close to frills), but you're sure to meet some fellow travelers.

A good budget option is the **Last Home Guesthouse** (#47, St. 108; ✆ **023/724-917**), on the promenade south of Wat Phnom, with concrete-block basic rooms above a popular little storefront eatery. Rooms range from $2 to $8 (£1.30–£5.30).

Capitol Guesthouse (#14 AEO, Rd. 182; ✆ **023/217-627**) is the town's backpacker information center and offers very basic concrete rooms from $2 (£1.30).

WHERE TO DINE

Between remnants of French colonialism and the recent influx of humanitarian aid workers, international cuisine abounds in the Cambodian capital. Some restaurants themselves are actually NGO (nongovernmental organization) projects designed to raise money for local causes or provide training. Ask Khmer folks where to eat, and you'll be pointed to any of the street-side stalls or storefront Chinese noodle shops south of the Central Market. Good eats can also be had on riverside Sisowath or in and among the lazy alleys of the town center.

Expensive

FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club) ★ CONTINENTAL With a long history as Phnom Penh's place to see and be seen, the FCC is as much a tour stop as a restaurant. Once the gathering place of the dust-caked, camera-toting, intrepid breed who came to chronicle the country's troubled times, the FCC is now a multifloor affair of restaurant,

Finds Prek Leap

For an interesting evening of local fun and frolic, cross the Cambodian–Japanese Friendship bridge on the Tonle Sap River in the north end of town, and follow the main road a few short clicks to the town of **Prek Leap,** a grouping of large riverside eateries that's always crowded with locals on the weekend. Some of these places put on popular variety shows, combining the universal language of slapstick with a good chance to eat, talk, and laugh with locals. The restaurants serve similar good Khmer and Chinese fare. Go by taxi and pick the most crowded place—the more, the merrier.

bar, and shops done in dark wood and terra cotta. There are low reclining chairs in the cafe area, a fine-dining room, and a bar that serves as the stalwart centerpiece. The whole second floor is oriented to the fine views of the river and busy Sisowath below. Ceiling fans dangle from the high, exposed roof and spin oblong patterns; geckos, as everywhere in town, chase along the walls. Come for a drink and pretend you're here on assignment. The food is uninspired Western, but the execution is good. The FCC makes fine pizza in its wood-fired oven and has good snacks including nachos, enchiladas, and treats such as "Death by Chocolate," a fudge cake with mousse and ice cream. The upstairs bar is very popular in the evening, and the whole place is abuzz with activity day and night, whether for power lunches or late-night laughs. There is also wireless Internet available (buy a prepaid card). The FCC is a good place to pick up information on travel, volunteering, or work in the area.

#363 Sisowath St. ✆ **023/724-014.** www.fcccambodia.com. Main courses $8–$17 (£5.30–£11). MC, V. Daily 6am–midnight.

River House ★★ FRENCH/CONTINENTAL One of many along the riverside, this bar and restaurant, like the nearby FCC (see above), stands out by virtue of size and style. A classic corner colonial, its downstairs is an open-air bar area with quaint patio seating under canvas umbrellas. There's also a new, elegant air-conditioned dining room. Upstairs is a bass-thumping, dimly lit club with a dance floor that's a popular late-night haunt. Elegant rattan chairs, two stately bars in wood and glass, and the fine linen and silver presentation are luxurious far beyond the price tag. The food is excellent, characterized by French specials such as duck done as you like, coq au vin, and a popular chateaubriand with morel mushrooms. Come for a romantic dinner and stay for dancing.

#6, St. 110 (corner of Sisowath). ✆ **023/212-302** or 023/220-180. Main courses $7–$32 (£4.65–£21). AE, MC, V. Daily 10:30am–11pm ('til 1am Sat–Sun).

Topaz ★★ FRENCH/CONTINENTAL Good familiar food and atmosphere that's sophisticated and stylish are the hallmarks of Topaz, a long-standing French bistro with a new location. In air-conditioned comfort, guests sit at elegant tables with fine linen, silver, and real stemware in a formal dining room unrivaled in town. The menu features great steaks, pasta, and salad. The Caesar salad is noteworthy. Daily lunch sets are popular with the business crowd, and daily specials are contingent on the day's imports of fish or steaks. Wine abounds, with some great choices.

#182 Norodom Blvd. (near downtown sites). ✆ **023/221-622.** Main courses $8.20–$35 (£5.45–£23). MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm and 6pm–midnight.

Moderate

Cantina ★★ MEXICAN This riverfront restaurant holds the distinction of being one of the only decent Mexican joints for miles—and miles. While it might not stand its ground in Texas or California, the place does provide a bit of comfort food for the homesick. Inside, Cantina's walls are filled with the works of local photographers, notable among them a chronicler of conflicts in Vietnam and Cambodia, Al Rockoff. It is also a de facto headquarters for local journalists and aid workers. Try anything from the tostadas to the burritos, and finish up with an ice-cream sundae or banana split.

#347 Sisowath St. ✆ **023/222-502.** Main courses $3.25–$6.25 (£2.15–£4.15). No credit cards. Sun–Fri 2:30–10pm.

Comme á la Maison ★ CONTINENTAL Expats love this place. It's quiet, with the biggest commotion on weekend mornings, when a steady stream of deliveries leaves the

bakery. Light fare tops the bill, with good soups and salads perfect for sopping up with something freshly baked. Comme á la Maison also features heartier French entrees and meat and cheese platters, as well as good pizzas and pastas. Follow up with fresh yogurt, fruit, and tasty desserts. Breakfast is good, too. The quiet courtyard area is at the top of the list for escaping the chaos of busy Phnom Penh.

#13 St. 57 (around the corner from Goldiana, southwest of town center). ✆ **023/360-801.** www.commealamaison-delicatessen.com. Main courses $5–$9.50 (£3.30–£6.30). No credit cards. Daily 6am–10:30pm.

Le Deauville ★ FRENCH This open-air French bar and brasserie, on the north end of the Wat Phnom roundabout, is a good, mellow choice for affordable French and Khmer dishes. The atmosphere is unpretentious and cozy, with a large open bar at the center and tables scattered in the street-side courtyard (and shielded from the traffic by a wall of potted greenery). Daily lunch set menus give you a choice of salad and entree, including local specialties such as Mekong fish with lime or beef medallions. The restaurant serves good pizzas and spaghetti, and its wine list fits just about any taste or budget. Le Deauville is also a popular spot for a casual drink in the evening.

Kj St. 94 (just north of Wat Phnom). ✆ **012/843-204.** Main courses $4.50–$9.50 (£3–£6.30). V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–10pm.

Metro Café ★ ASIAN/INTERNATIONAL This stylish, contemporary restaurant serves excellent food in a corner-side location overlooking the river. The food is excellent, mostly seafood and Australian beef. They've got a nice selection of "small plates" for those who want lighter portions. Try the ginger soy grilled fish, a small, flavorful plate served with a bean sprout salad. On the large plate menu, the grilled tenderloin served with a side of fries will knock out any hunger pangs. There's free Wi-Fi access and an extensive martini menu to boot.

271 St. 148 (on the corner with Sisowath Quay). ✆ **023/222-275.** Main courses $3.80–$19 (£2.50–£13). MC, V (minimum $20/£11). Daily 10am–midnight.

Pacharan ★★ SPANISH This is a hip new place serving the city's most scrumptious tapas. They've got all the favorites: *patatas bravas,* cured meats, Spanish tortillas—the list goes on. In keeping with tapas spirit, portions are small, and you're meant to order different plates to share among friends. The chicken *croquettas* are perfectly crispy. If you have room, try the chocolate tart, a healthy portion of rich chocolate served with a side of vanilla ice cream. They also have a fine selection of Spanish wines.

389 Sisowath Quay. ✆ **023/224-394.** Tapas $3.50–$11 (£2.30–£7.30). MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight.

Rendezvous Café ★ CONTINENTAL There are so many small eateries lining the riverfront of Sisowath Road, it's hard to pick. Here's one of the best, an open-air corner bar with big, comfy rattan chairs in a prime people-watching location on the north end of Sisowath Quay, the riverside road. The Rendezvous serves solid Western pub grub: burgers, steaks, and chicken dishes, as well as good pizzas and sandwiches. This is a great place to have a cold beer and a meat-and-potatoes meal, or perhaps a fruit shake and a simple salad or sandwich. The staff members couldn't be nicer; they're amenable to suggestions (such as burgers cooked to order), and they'll make you feel like a local from the get-go. The bar hops late into the night.

#127Eo, corner of Sisowath Quay and St. 108. ✆ **023/986-466.** Main courses $3–$8.50 (£2–£5.65). No credit cards. Daily 6:30am–11pm.

Tamarind Café ★ FRENCH/MEDITERRANEAN Good tapas, *meze* (Middle Eastern appetizers), salads, and a host of French and Mediterranean entrees make Tamarind's cool perch, overlooking busy Street 240, an excellent choice. This spot in the popular cafe and gallery area makes a perfect break for Dad to prop his feet up (after grabbing a book or a local rag at the nearby London Book Centre) while Mom goes shopping. The pastas and pizzas are delicious, and fresh salads and light menu items are just right on a hot day. The bar is always busy and stays open late.

#31, St. 240. ✆ **012/830-139.** Main courses $5–$15 (£3.30–£10). MC, V. Daily 10am–midnight.

Inexpensive

In addition to the following options, there are lots of affordable open-air cafes along riverside Sisowath.

Boddhi Tree ★ ASIAN/KHMER You can easily combine lunch here with a trip to nearby Tuol Sleng prison (p. 413), a site that doesn't inspire an appetite, really, but the Boddhi Tree is a peaceful oasis and not a bad spot to collect your thoughts after visiting vestiges of Cambodia's late troubles. Named for the tree under which the Buddha "saw the light," this verdant little garden courtyard and rough-hewn guesthouse has comfy balcony and courtyard seating, where it seems to serve up as much calm as the coffee, tea, and light fare that make it so popular. There are daily specials and often visiting chefs. All the curries are good, as are the great baguette sandwiches. Established in 1997 as a way to drum up funds and support for Khmer kids and families in challenging circumstances, the folks here welcome your suggestions and invite visitors to get involved in their important work.

#50, St. 113, Beong Keng Kong (across from Tuol Sleng Museum). ✆ **023/211-397.** Main courses $1.75–$4.85 (£1.15–£3.20). No credit cards. Daily 7am–9pm.

Friends (Mith Samlanh) Restaurant ★★ KHMER/INTERNATIONAL Not to be missed is this friendly little gem, an NGO project where Khmer street kids are given shelter and taught useful skills for their reintegration into society: It's a special opportunity to meet young folks who've found a new lease on life. The food is great, mind you, an ever-changing menu of local and international favorites such as spring rolls, fried rice, good salads, and a host of desserts, including a delicious sweet sticky rice with local fruit. Stop by to cool off and have a light bite while touring the city center (it's right across from the must-see National Museum); the place is a cozy open-air colonial in a courtyard done up in murals of the kids' drawings. The name of the restaurant means "good friends," and you might even find yourself giving English lessons, laughing, and smiling with these young survivors. The helpful staff members are happy to talk about their many efforts, including drug and AIDS programs and a 500-student vocational facility. They also run a boutique next door called **Friends and Stuff,** which sells reconditioned electronics and new crafts from their training center.

#215, St. 13 (near entrance to National Museum). ✆ **012/802-072** or 023/426-748. www.streetfriends.org. Main courses $4–$5 (£2.65–£3.30). No credit cards. Daily 11am–9pm.

Snacks & Cafes

Java Café and Gallery (#56 E1 Preah Sihanouk Blvd.; ✆ **012/833-512** or 023/987-420) is a good spot in town to relax and escape the midday heat. Just south of the main sights (near the Independence Monument), this popular second-story oasis has casual seating on a large balcony and an open gallery interior. It serves real coffee and cappuccino as well as good cakes and other baked goods. Evenings can feature live music. Open daily 7am to 10pm.

The **Deli** at #13, St. 178 (✆ **012/851-234**) is an expat favorite for a good sandwich and excellent pastries.

The **Shop** is a nice little stop on popular Street 240 (✆ **023/986-964**), now with a new location on the north end of Sisowath Quay. It serves fine baked goods and great teas and coffees in a friendly and comfortable storefront at each location. There are neat details, such as butcher-block tables and fresh flowers, and the Shop can arrange picnic lunches for day trips from Phnom Penh.

The **Sugar Palm** (#19, St. 240; ✆ **023/220-956**) serves good Khmer dishes street side or from its upstairs balcony. The interior also functions as a gallery, with local crafts on display. This is a great place to relax and enjoy real Khmer atmosphere.

Pizza can be found at any number of storefronts on the crowded riverside; **Happy Pizza** (#223 Sisowath Quay; ✆ **012/559-114**) is among them. Beginning with the name, there are cute little codes in play here, so to be direct: Tell the staff, "Please don't put marijuana on my pizza," unless you want it. Same drill at **Ecstatic Pizza** (193C Norodom Blvd.; ✆ **023/365-089**). Both are good and will deliver.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

All downtown attractions can be reached on foot, but you'll want to hire a car with a driver or, for the brave, a motorcycle taxi to reach sights outside the city center. **Tuol Sleng** and the **Killing Fields** can be visited together; arrangements can be made in any hotel lobby.

Central Market This Art Deco behemoth, built in 1937, is a city landmark and, on any given day, a veritable anthill of activity. Locals call it *Psar Thmei,* or New Market. The building has a towering rotunda with busy wings extending in four directions. The eastern entrance is the best spot to find T-shirts, hats, and all manner of trinkets and souvenirs, as well as photocopied bootlegs of popular novels and books on Cambodia. Goldsmiths, watch repair, and sales counters predominate in the main rotunda; you can find some good deals here. Spend time wandering the nooks and crannies, though, and you're sure to come across something that strikes your fancy, whether that's a chaotic hardware shop, a cobbler hard at work with an awl, or just the cacophony and carnival-barker shouts of salesmen and haggling shoppers. Be sure to bargain for any purchase.

Btw. sts. 126 and 136 in town center. Daily 5am–5pm.

Independence Monument Built in the late 1950s to commemorate Cambodia's independence from the French on November 9, 1953, this towering obelisk is crowned with Khmer *nagas* and is reminiscent of Angkor architecture and Hindu influence. The area is at its most majestic when all lit up at night.

South of town center at intersection of Norodom and Sihanouk boulevards.

"The Killing Fields," Choeung Ek Memorial ★★ Originally a Chinese cemetery before becoming the execution grounds for the Khmer Rouge during their maniacal reign under Pol Pot from 1975 to 1979, the site is a collection of mounds, mass graves, and a towering monument of cataloged human skulls. The memorial was erected in 1980 and is well designed and thought-provoking. It houses the remains of just under 9,000 exhumed bodies, roughly half the number believed to have been buried at this site. The monument is 17 stories high, reminding visitors of April 17, 1975, the day the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia. As a sign of respect, take your shoes off before mounting the three or four steps to view the monument up close. Human skulls, arranged by age and gender, are arranged at eye level, while other bones are placed on higher levels. It's a sharp

confrontation with Cambodia's recent tragedy. Around the monument, select mass gravesites have been marked for viewing. Because only half of the buried bodies have been uncovered, new items are being unearthed all the time. Indeed, the dirt path connecting the memorial and the graves contains partially buried pieces of clothing, and even some decayed bones. If you didn't know any better, you might mistake them for pieces of fractured stones. The rainy season softens the earth, pushing these buried items up to the surface when it dries. Plans are underway to build a museum and show an informative documentary at this chilling site.

15km (9¼ miles) south of Phnom Penh. Arrange a private car or motorcycle. Admission $2; guides available (highly recommended) in exchange for donations. Daily 8am–5:30pm.

National Museum ★★★ What the British Museum is to the Elgin Marbles of Greece's Parthenon, the National Museum of Phnom Penh, opened in 1920 by King Sisowath, is to the statuary of Angkor Wat. This important storehouse holds artifacts and statuary from all over the country. The sad fact is that many pieces didn't make it here, but were plundered and smuggled out of the country. Nevertheless, this grand red-sandstone edifice contains a beautiful and informative collection of Khmer pieces. From the entrance, begin on your left with a room of small prehistoric artifacts. A clockwise loop around the central courtyard walks you through time, from static, stylized pieces of stiff-legged, standing Buddhas, to contra-posed and contorted forms in supplication. There are good accompanying descriptions in English, but this is not a bad place to have a knowledgeable guide (ask in the lobby). The central courtyard features a *Shiva lingam* (icon of the god Shiva) and large temple fragments. At the more significant works (the statue of Jayavarman, for example), elderly ladies, looking like museum docents, hand out incense and flowers and instruct visitors to place them on makeshift altars. Don't feel obliged—it's kind of off-putting to some. If you do participate, drop a few riel and ignore entreaties for a larger donation.

Just north of Royal Palace at St. 178, and a short walk from the river. Admission $3 (£2). Daily 8–11am and 2–5:30pm.

Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda ★★★ Don't miss this glittery downtown campus, the ostentatious jewel in the crown of Cambodia's monarchy. Built in the late 1860s under the reign of Norodom, the site comprises many elaborate gilded halls, all with steep tile roofs, stupa-shaped cupolas, and golden temple *nagas* denoting prosperity. The grand **Throne Hall** at the center is the coronation site for Khmer kings and the largest gilded cathedral in the country. Don't miss the many royal busts and the gilded umbrella used to shade the king when in procession. The French built a small exhibition hall on the temple grounds, a building that now houses the many gifts given to the monarchy, among them cross-stitch portraits of the royal family and all manner of bric-a-brac. Just inside the door, don't miss an original by Cézanne that has suffered terrible water damage and hangs in a ratty frame like an unwanted diploma—a shame. The balcony of the exhibition hall is the best bird's-eye view of the gilded temples. The facade of the neighboring **Royal Residence** is just as resplendent and is still the home of the now abdicated King Sihanouk and his son and successor.

The **Silver Pagoda** is just south of the palace; entrance is included with the Royal Palace ticket. The floors of this grand temple are covered with 5,000 blocks of silver weighing more than 6 tons. The temple houses a 17th-century Buddha made of Baccarat crystal, and another made almost entirely of gold and decorated with nearly 10,000 diamonds. That's

not exactly what the Buddha had in mind, perhaps, but it's quite beautiful. The temple courtyard is encircled by a covered walkway with a contiguous mural of Cambodia's history and mythology. On the southern end of the complex is a small hill covered in vegetation and said to be a model of the sacred Mount Meru; there's a large Buddha footprint and a small temple that provokes very devout practice in Khmer visitors.

Btw. sts. 240 and 184 on Sothearos (entrance on east side facing the river). Admission $3 (£2), $5 (£3.30) with still camera; $8 (£5.30) with video camera. Daily 7:30–11am and 2–5pm.

Russian Market This bustling market in the south end of town is comparable to the Central Market and equally worthy of a visit (it's a good stop on the return trip from the Killing Fields; otherwise, go by cab). The real deal on souvenirs can be had here, though it takes hard haggling to get the best prices on neat items such as opium paraphernalia, carvings, and ceramics. It's all authentic-looking, even if it's made in China.

South of town center btw. sts. 440 and 450. Daily dawn–dusk.

Tuol Sleng, Museum of Genocide ★★ The grounds of this high-school-turned-prison-and-torture-chamber are like they were in 1979 at the end of Cambodia's bloody genocide. A stop here is a visceral revisiting of some very horrible events, and guides are often just as brutal in their portrayal of it, too much so for some visitors. From 1975 until 1979, an estimated 17,000 political prisoners, most just ordinary citizens, were tortured at Tuol Sleng and died, or were executed in the nearby Killing Fields. If you don't come with a guide, you'll certainly want to hire one at the entrance, although you're free to roam the grounds on your own. Local guides often have personal experience with the prison and are vital sources of oral history. They are open to questions, but go easy on any debate. Recrimination against the perpetrators of these horrible events is an important issue here; Cambodians hope to move on into the future, but they fear revisiting the past in the current international tribunals. The prison population of Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, was carefully cataloged; in fact, the metal neck brace, employed for holding subjects' heads in place for the admitting photograph, is on display. There are some written accounts in English, paintings done by a survivor, and gory photos of the common torture practices in the prison, but perhaps what is most haunting is the fear in the eyes of the newly arrived; one wing of the buildings is dedicated to these very arrival photos. This sight is a bit overwhelming for some, so be prepared.

South of town at corner of sts. 350 and 113. Admission $2 (£1.15); guide fees vary, but are usually $2–$3 (£1.30–£2) per person. Daily 8am–noon and 1–5pm.

Wat Phnom ★★ This is Cambodia's "Church on the Hill." Legend has it that in the 14th century, a woman named Penh found sacred Buddhist objects in the nearby river and placed them here on the small hill that later became a temple. Well, the rest is history. *Phnom,* in fact, means "hill," so the name of the city translates to "Penh's Hill."

The temple is a standard Southeast Asian *wat,* with *nagas* (snakes) on the cornered peaks of the roof and didactic murals of the Buddha's life done in day-glo allegories along interior walls. Don't miss the central ceiling, which, unlike the bright walls, is yet to be restored and is gritty and authentic.

The hillside park around the temple was once a no-go zone peopled by armed dealers and pimps, and in the evening you should still be careful, though now it's a laid-back little park. You're sure to meet with some crafty young salesmen here who'll offer you the chance to show your Buddhist compassion by buying a caged bird for a dollar and letting it go; if you stick around long enough, you'll see the bird return to the comfort of the cage.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

If your hotel lacks an outdoor pool, head to the **Clark Hatch Fitness Center** (✆ **023/424-888**) at the Hotel InterContinental. This place has it all in the way of equipment. Daily visitors are invited for a fee ($10/£6.65 weekdays, $15/£10 weekends), with pool and sauna included. It's open daily from 6am to 10pm.

SHOPPING

Shops and galleries are growing in number in the developing capital. The best shopping in town, for everything from souvenirs and trinkets to the obligatory kitchen sink, is at any of the large local markets (see the Central Market and Russian Market under "What to See & Do," above).

All along Street 178, interesting little outlets are springing up, including a few affordable silk dealers such as **Lotus Pond** (#57Eo, St. 178; ✆ **023/426-782**). At **Asasax Art Gallery** (#192, St. 178; ✆ **023/217-795;** www.asasaxart.com.kh), you'll see unique local works.

Street 240 is also developing its own cafe culture. It has a few hole-in-the-wall antiques shops and boutiques, such as **Bliss** (#29, St. 240; ✆ **023/215-754**), which sells some unique beaded and embroidered cushions and quilts.

Near the Independence Monument, **Bazar** (28 Sihanouk Blvd.; ✆ **012/776-492**) has a small but refined collection of Asian antiques and furniture.

For CDs, DVDs, and cool T-shirts and hip-hop fashions, stop by the **Boom Boom Room,** on Street 93 in the backpacker area near Boeung Kok Lake, or at its new location just across from the Golden Gate Hotel (#1C, St. 278; ✆ **012/709-906**).

For essentials and Western groceries, stop by the **Lucky Market** (#160, Sihanouk Blvd.; ✆ **023/215-229**). For fresh organic produce and fine canned goods, try **Veggy's** (#23, St. 240; ✆ **023/211-534**).

Monument Books (#111, Norodom Blvd.; ✆ **023/217-617**) has a great selection of new titles; it's a good spot to find books on Khmer language and culture. Stop by the **London Book Centre** (#51, St. 240; ✆ **023/214-258**), among the new bistros and cafes, to exchange or buy new and used books; there's a good selection here.

PHNOM PENH AFTER DARK

Phnom Penh is notorious for some of the seediest nightlife in all of Southeast Asia. There are some good, friendly bars in town, though many are of the "hostess bar" variety. Most good romps start or end at the town's counterculture hub, the **Heart of Darkness** (#38, St. 51, Pasteur), open from 8pm until sunrise. Done in burgundy tones and cluttered with statuary and memorabilia, the Heart, as it's called, has had a face-lift in recent years and is not as seedy as its reputation of yore (though it's still a bit of a relief to see the metal detectors). It's where to go to find out what's on in town.

The downtown area along the riverside is chockablock with small storefront bars and a few upscale spots. For good atmosphere with less chaos than the Heart, try either the bar at **River House** (see "Where to Dine," earlier in this chapter) or **Pontoon Lounge** on the riverbank near the Rendezvous Café; (✆ **012/572-880;**), a barge bar with a hip interior. The **Rising Sun** (#20, St. 178; ✆ **023/970-719**) is one of the more comfy holes in the wall, a dark wooden stopover great for a few pints and a game of darts near the town center. **Pacharan** (see "Where to Dine," earlier in this chapter) is a great (clean) option for casual, late-night drinks.

SIDE TRIPS FROM PHNOM PENH

Mekong River Cruise

To escape the clamor of Phnom Penh, check out the riverfront on Sisowath Boulevard between the Amanjaya Hotel and the River House Restaurant, where you can rent a whole boat for $10 (£6.65) per hour. You'll find these boats moored along the bank, with names such as Paris Boat Tours. Bring your own food and beverages and cast off, up the Mekong, where you'll catch glimpses of river life as you navigate between fishing boats and barges and watch the muddy banks drift by. It's best done between 4 and 7pm, to catch the setting sun.

Oudong

Following defeat at Angkor by the Thais, the Khmer capital moved to Oudong, and kings ruled from here for more than 100 years until the power center shifted to nearby Phnom Penh in 1866. The area was a monastic center, and the 13th-century temples, like most others, pale in comparison to those of the Angkor complex. Still, the hills of Oudong offer breathtaking views. It's an hour west of Phnom Penh and is best reached by rented vehicle.

Phnom Chisor & Tonle Bati

If you have been or are going to Angkor Wat, these temples will pale in comparison, but the ride through the countryside and among rural villages makes for a good day trip. Tonle Bati (33km/21 miles south of Phnom Penh) is a small collection of Angkor-style temples. Admission is $3 (£2). Nearby Phnom Chisor is a group of 10th-century ruins atop a picturesque hill. Phnom Penh travel agents can make all the arrangements.

Sihanoukville

In Cambodia, your only bet for a dip in the ocean and beachside R & R is at Sihanoukville, some 230km (143 miles) south of Phnom Penh on the American-built highway. A popular summer time spot for Khmers, Sihanoukville is really a port town, and though the beaches don't stack up to the likes of Thailand's, they aren't bad, either. Trips to outlying islands for scuba diving and snorkeling are attracting more and more Western visitors. To get there, contact **Capitol Tour** (✆ **023/217-627**) or **Ho Wa Genting Bus Co.** (✆ **023/210-859**), each with daily connections for the 3- to 4-hour ride. You can also contact any hotel front desk or travel agent about renting a car for the ride from Phnom Penh.

Where once it was only low-end accommodations and seedy casinos, there is now the **Sokha Beach Resort & Spa** (✆ **034/935-999;** www.sokhahotels.com), with 180 upmarket rooms starting at $250 (£167). Amenities include a nice central pool and frontage on a stretch of private beach. There are a number of smaller hotels and guesthouses as well: Try **Orchidee Guesthouse** (✆ **034/933-639;** www.orchideeguesthouse.com) or **Reef Resort** (✆ **034/934-281;** www.reefresort.com.kh), a great little hotel with an outdoor swimming pool. For dining, you'll find good seafood at low prices at lots of small ocean-side budget stops. Don't miss a visit to the **Snakehouse** (✆ **012/782-873**), a restaurant and menagerie of local coldblooded inhabitants (for viewing, not eating).

For tours to outlying islands, contact the folks at EcoAdventures South East Asia LTD (in the Samudera Market, Town Center, Sihanoukville; ✆ 012/654-104; www.ecosea.com). It arranges great day tours with stops in remote coves where clients can snorkel or take a course in scuba.

Kep ★★★

Once known as the country's emerging Riviera, following the exit of the French from Indochina, Kep fell into obscurity during Cambodia's violent years. It is making a comeback, however, and visitors can now get here by comfortable bus. Still, the town remains basically undiscovered and is certainly off the map for most tours.

There are several nice places to stay, including **Knai Bang Chatt** (Phum Thmey Sangkat Prey, Thom Khan Kep; ✆ **012/879-486;** www.knaibangchatt.com), a seaside property of four villas (three renovated and one new), built in what was called the New Modern Khmer style of the 1960s. Rooms are $200 to $400 (£133–£267). At the more moderately priced **Veranda Natural Resort** (Kep Hillside Rd., Krong Kep; ✆ **012/888-619;** www.veranda-resort.com), hillside bungalows go for $25 to $70 (£17–£47), the two-floor villa $200 (£133). Other guesthouses can be found near the Crab Market.

From Kep, travelers can take day excursions to lush Rabbit Island, motorcycle to the top of Bokor Mountain, or explore surrounding countryside roads and visit limestone caves and temples. Book these activities from your hotel or guesthouse.

To get here, go to the Olympic Market in Phnom Penh, near the Olympic Stadium, and find the Hua Lian transportation company's kiosk. Tickets cost $4 (£2.65), the ride takes 5 hours, and buses leave at 7:30am and 1pm.

5 SIEM REAP & ANGKOR WAT ★★★

The ruins of the ancient city of **Angkor,** capital of the Khmer kingdom from 802 until 1295, are one of the world's marvels. The largest religious monument ever constructed, it's a vast and mysterious complex of hulking laterite and sandstone blocks. Unknown to the world until French naturalist Henri Mouhot literally stumbled onto it in 1861, the area of Angkor existed for centuries only as a myth—a wondrous city (or cities, to be exact), its exact location in the Cambodian jungle unknown.

The temple complex covers some 97 sq. km (37 sq. miles) and includes the remains of passageways, moats, temples, and palaces that represent centuries of building in the capital. The temples are served by the nearby town of **Siem Reap,** some 6km (3¾ miles) to the south.

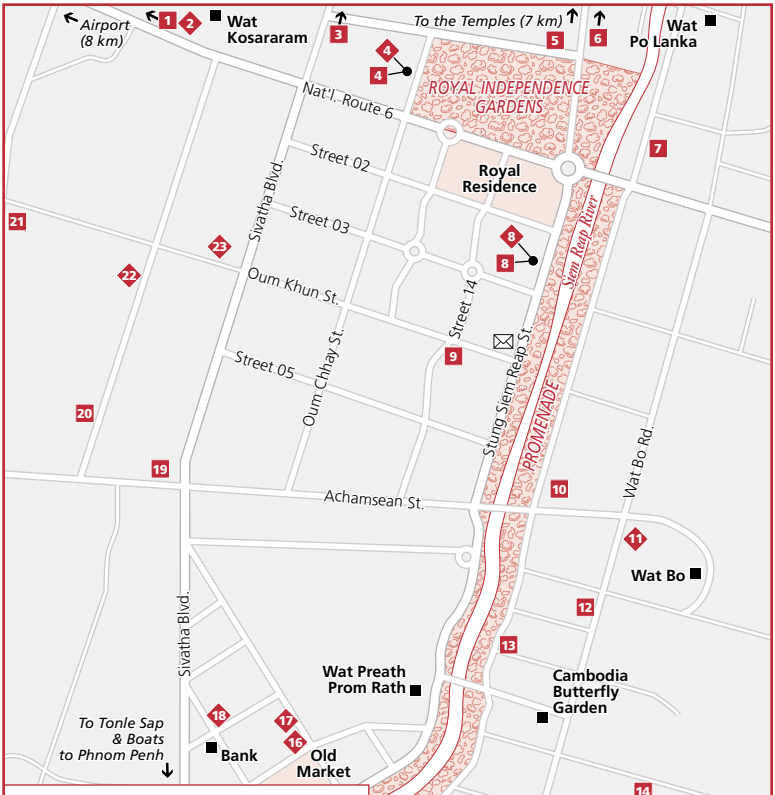
A 3- or 4-day visit will suffice (though many do it in fewer). More than a few visitors come away with a newfound love for ancient cultures, Asian religions, and sunsets.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Siem Reap Airways, Royal Phnom Penh Airways, President Airlines, and Bangkok Air all fly the 1-hour connection to Siem Reap from Phnom Penh.

If you just want to see the great temples at Angkor, the process is simplified with international arrivals: Bangkok Airways flies directly from Bangkok, and you can check flights by Silk Air, Lao Aviation, Vietnam Airlines, and Royal Camboge Airline for other routes. ***Note:*** The international departure tax (from both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap) is $25 (£17); the domestic tax is $10 to $14 (£6.65–£9.30), depending on where you're flying.

BY BOAT A ride on the 5-hour boat connection between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap costs $25 (£17). Contact any hotel or travel agent, as they all sell the same tickets at the same price. The trip connects to Siem Reap via the great Tonle Sap Lake, with some good



ACCOMMODATIONS
Amansara **6**
Angkor Hotel **1**
Angkor Village Hotel **14**
Angkor Village Resort **6**
Auberge Mont Royal d'Angkor **20**
Bopha Angkor **13**
FCC Angkor **8**
Hôtel de la Paix **19**
La Noria **7**
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Passagio **15**
Pavillon Indochine **3**
Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor **10**
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Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf and Spa Resort **3**
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DINING
Abacus **23**
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Khmer Kitchen Restaurant **16**
Le Bistrot de Siem Reap **4**
Madame Butterfly **2**
The Red Piano **18**
The Soup Dragon **17**
The Sugar Palm **22**
Viroth's **11**

scenery en route. Also see the new, more luxurious boat service run by **Mekong Express** (87 Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh; ✆ **023/427-518**), which costs $35 (£23).

BY BUS **Capitol Tour** (#14 AEO, Rd. 182, Sangkat Beng Prolitt; ✆ **023/217-627**) runs daily minivans along the much-improved road between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Tickets for the all-day ride are $17 (£11).

GETTING AROUND

You'll need some kind of wheeled conveyance to make your way around Siem Reap and to and from the temples. Any hotel front desk or travel agent can make arrangements for you.

A **rented car with driver** is about $25 (£17; double that with a guide). A **motorcycle taxi** is a good, cheap option for $8 (£5.30) per day, and there are also motorbikes that pull **tuk-tuks,** small, covered trailers for two (kind of fun, really), for about $11 (£7.30) per day.

Riding your own motorbike was once the most popular choice, but local officials have put a stop to it, citing the many road accidents. **Bicycles** are still a possibility, however, and the temple roads are flat and well paved. Bikes rent for $2 to $3 (£1.30–£2) per day from guesthouses and hotels. Take care in the scorching midday heat and drink plenty of fluids.

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

Contact either of the following agencies for information and tours.

- **Diethelm Travel,** House #4, Airport Rd. #6, Krum #1, Sangkat #2, Phum Taphul, Siem Reap (✆ **063/963-524;** fax 063/963-694; dtc@dtc.com.kh). All local and regional services.
- **Exotissimo Travel,** #300, Airport Rd. #6, Siem Reap (✆ **063/964-323;** fax 063/963-621; www.exotissimo.com). All local and regional services.

Fast Facts Siem Reap

Currency Exchange You can change traveler's checks in some hotels and in any bank; **Canadia Bank** (on the western side of the Old Market; ✆ **063/964-808**) and **ANZ Royal Bank** (566–570 St. Tep Vong; ✆ **023/999-000**) are the best options for service. **ANZ** has several ATMs around town including one at the central branch and two 24-hour ATMs in the heart of the backpacker district just south of Red Piano Bar. **Cambodia Commercial Bank** (**CCB;** 130 Siwatha Blvd.; ✆ **063/380-154**) and **Mekong Bank** (43 Siwatha Blvd.; ✆ **063/964-420**) can do credit card cash advances as well.

Emergencies There is a tourist police station near the entrance to the temples. For local police, dial ✆ **117.** In the event of a medical emergency, contact **International SOS Clinic,** in Phnom Penh (✆ **023/216-911**).

Internet Access Small storefront offices aplenty surround the Central Market area. On the main street, try **E-Café** (#011, Siwatha Blvd.), an air-conditioned facility with speedy ADSL for just more than $2 (£1.30) per hour. If you have a wireless-capable laptop, the **Blue Pumpkin** and **Molly Malone's** offer free Wi-Fi access, or you can connect using prepaid PIC cards at the **FCC** restaurant or the **Raffles Grand** and **Sofitel** hotels.

Mail The post office is located on Pokambor Avenue, at riverside near the town center (next to the FCC; see "Where to Dine," later). It's open daily from 7am to 5pm and can handle foreign and domestic regular and parcel post.

Telephones The area code for Siem Reap is **63.** Most hotels have international direct dialing (IDD). Many of the Internet cafes around the Old Market have better rates and offer callback service or Internet phones.

WHERE TO STAY

Tourist levels are high, thus development has really revved up in tiny Siem Reap. Visitors can choose from some of the finest upscale accommodations in the region—more five-star properties than we can list.

For midrange hotels (below $100/£67), there are lots of bland choices, especially on the airport road. Some smaller properties are sprucing themselves up to a more boutique-hotel standard—there are a few atmospheric gems here.

In high season, high-end accommodations often fill up, so be sure to book ahead. During the low season, ask for a discount. Most hotels levy a 10% VAT.

Very Expensive

Amansara ★★★ If there's one place to splurge in Southeast Asia, Amansara is it. Transformed into an ultraluxury resort from former King Norodom Sihanouk's private guesthouses, the space at Amansara alone is worth it. Suites—there are no "rooms" here—are elegant and minimalist, with bas-reliefs on creamy walls, dark-wood trim, and polished stone floors. Baths are drawn with warm water each afternoon; the separate shower looks out onto a courtyard or a private saltwater swimming pool. The dining is fabulous here, in a restaurant that was once King Sihanouk's private screening room (in his heyday, he was a prolific filmmaker).

But what really sets Amansara apart is the way it brings Khmer culture—both ancient and modern—inside the walls. Lectures and performances are frequent occurrences, the library is stocked with helpful books, and the staff members feel more like friendly neighbors than anything else. It's all done on a first-name basis, without being obtrusive. Ask about the traditional water blessing and other activities. Amansara has also taken great care to research the Angkor temples, in an effort to get its guests to both the main attractions and the out-of-the-way structures; guides and drivers are knowledgeable as well. Walk into Amansara for a stay, and you'll walk out again feeling relaxed, replenished, and educated.

Road to Angkor, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/760-333.** Fax 063/760-335. www.amanresorts.com. 24 units. High season $850 (£567) suite, $1,150 (£767) pool suite; low season $750 (£500) suite, $950 (£633) pool suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; central outdoor pool and 25m (82-ft.) lap pool; spa; all rentals available; shopping; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; excellent library w/Internet access; tuk-tuks; guide. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Hôtel de la Paix ★★ Old-world Indochine is *so* overdone. Hôtel de la Paix is an elegant, modern minimalist hotel, a sharp contrast to most high-end hotels around here. The lobby is Art Deco with black and white tiles and stark white walls that are shockingly broken by neon pink lights behind the lobby lounge. Room interiors have a similar monochromatic scheme, but with accent pillows in deep purple and silver wall hangings and lamps. Suites come with white marble bathtubs that lie a couple of feet away from

the foot of the bed. Ar ound the corner is the funky stone sho wer console with tr opical showerhead. The hotel's par tially cov ered outdoor pool, with large blocks of sandstone covered in mattresses and triangle head rests, looks like something out of an epic Roman movie. The hotel was originally constr ucted in 1955, was occupied by commanders and government officials of the Khmer R ouge during the '70s, and finally r eturned to the tourism authority in the late '80s. The original str ucture was demolished and the hotel you see today was built entir ely from scratch.

Sivatha Blvd. ✆ **063/966-000.** Fax 063/966-001. www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com. 107 units. $330 (£220) deluxe; $460 (£307) delux e/courtyard suite; $715 (£477) duplex spa suit e. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; caf e; out door pool; fitness c enter; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; c oncierge; business c enter; t our arrangements; bab ysitting; laundr y. *In r oom:* A/C, sat ellite TV, DVD pla yer in suit es, iP od/MP3 dock ing station, minibar, fridge, hair dr yer, safe.

La Résidence d'Angkor ★★ Formerly the Pansea, La Résidence d'Angkor is a stylish, self-contained sanctuar y managed b y the people at O rient-Express. You'll cr oss a small moat to enter the cool interior of the steeply gabled, dar k wooden lobb y with its grand Angkor-inspir ed r eliefs. The tranquil central cour tyard is lined with palms and dominated by a small but stylish pool. The resort area is small, but ev erything from the gardens to the r oom decor is tidy and designed for quiet priv acy. Rooms are large, w ell appointed, open, and elegant, with cloth div ans, r etro fixtures, and nice local touches. Spacious bathrooms connect with the bedrooms via a bamboo sliding door, and another glass slider opens to a small private balcony with views of the courtyard and lounges. The lobby restaurant offers fine dining. There are some gr eat sitting ar eas for drinks, as w ell as a library with books, chess, and a confer ence table.

River Rd., Siem Reap. ✆ **063/963-390.** Fax 063/963-391. w ww.residencedangkor.com. 55 units. $175–$275 (£117–£183) deluxe riverside; $185–$290 (£123–£193) deluxe garden side; $200–$305 (£133–£203) poolside. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; business c enter w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor ★★★ For luxury, atmosphere, and conv enience, there is no better choice in S iem Reap. Rebuilt in 1994 fr om the shell of a classic 1929 structure, this is authentic old I ndochina that's neither museum piece nor o verly stuffy. Right in the center of to wn, the imposing colonial facade giv es way to a marble lobb y with an open metal elev ator—an original period piece that's still functional. S taterooms are large, with classic F rench doors and windo ws, tiled entries, fine furnishings, and an almost out-of-place high-tech enter tainment module. Landmar k rooms, a step up , ar e similar but have four-poster beds, a balcony with rattan furniture, and nice touches such as porcelain bathrooms and antique detail. The courtyard pool is large and inviting—like a commercial set—and the nearby massage and health facilities ar e impressive. It's expensive, very expensive, but the price includes v ery fine service and a revisiting of old Indochina that y ou can't find else where. The nightly *apsara* sho w is a traditional women 's temple dance to welcome goddesses.

1 Vithei Charles de G aulle, Khum Svay Dang Kum, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/963-888.** Fax 063/963-168. www.raffles.com. 120 units . $360–$410 (£240–£273) double; $510–$2,500 (£340–£1,667) suit e. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; out door pool; 2 t ennis c ourts; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; st eam room; kids' club; concierge; tour desk; car rental; shopping; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Sofitel A ngkor Phok eethra G olf and Spa Resor t ★★ Sofitel is famed for bringing life back to the classic hotels of old Indochina, but in Siem Reap, it started fresh

in 2000 with a project limited only by the designer's imagination. The lobby is an old-world Indochine replica with an antique Khmer pagoda and a menagerie of overstuffed European furniture. Design and decor throughout nicely marry Khmer and French styles, with vaulted *naga* roofs high above the sculpted central garden and tranquil pond area. The courtyard pool is large, open, and fun, including a short river meander crossed by a small bridge that's great for kids. Rooms are spacious, with dark-wood floors and rich touches such as designer throw rugs and elegant built-in cabinetry. All bathrooms are large, with tubs and granite counters. Spring for a superior room with a balcony and a view of the central courtyard—it's worth it. Not surprisingly, there's an Angkor theme throughout, but the statuary is not overdone and is quite pleasing in both common areas and sleeping quarters (unique in a town of gaudy reproductions of the sites). Be sure to find a moment, preferably near the magic hour of sunset (though any time will do), to take it all in from the island pagoda in the central pond.

Vithei Charles de Gaulle (on the way to temples, just north of town center), Khum Svay Dang Kum, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/964-600.** Fax 063/964-610. www.sofitel.com. 238 units. High season $552 (£368) superior, $592 (£395) luxury, $632–$812 (£421–£541) suite; low season $297 (£198) superior, $337 (£225) luxury, $377–$557 (£251–£371) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 2 bars; large outdoor pool; 18-hole golf course; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam room; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping; 24-hr. room service; fine massage facility; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; small library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, fax, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa ★★ The Victoria expands its empire of fine Indochine hotels (mostly in Vietnam) with this latest offering—an oversize but tasteful replica of a French colonial hotel, but with all of the amenities of a modern five-star. Public spaces are done in earth tones, rattan and wood accents, designer tiles, and fun local bric-a-brac. The effect is at times reminiscent of the days of pith helmets and gripes about local inefficiency. A large central atrium, with a period-piece elevator and a towering courtyard staircase, greets the visitor to this downtown setting, just a stone's throw from the Raffles (see above). The central pool is large and inviting; there are good spa services; and fine dining at the bistro is tops. Guest rooms are typical of Victoria hotels: large, luxurious, and decorated with location in mind (in other words, you know you're in Cambodia). All units have balconies. The wood floors are bordered with a fine tile that matches the luxurious woven bedspreads. Bathrooms are midsize, with separate tub and shower. The service is efficient and the list of amenities is extensive.

Central Park, P.O. Box 93145, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/760-428.** Fax 063/760-350. www.victoriahotels-asia.com. 130 units. $169–$180 (£113–£120) double; $494 (£329) colonial suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; large outdoor saltwater pool; spa; Jacuzzi; children's center; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Angkor Hotel ★ Of the many newer hotels along the airport road, Route 6, the Angkor Hotel is the best—and only slightly more expensive than the rest. It's large and ostentatious, with high, Khmer-style roofs and large reproductions of temple statuary in the entry. Everything is clean and comfortable, if a bit sterile. Guest rooms are bland but spacious, with crown molding, clean carpet, and familiar amenities such as minibars and safes. The bathrooms are a little small, though. Ask for a room facing the pool or in the new building in the back. The Angkor Hotel is a good, comfortable step down from the glitzier properties in town, and the best choice if they're full. The lobby is always busy with tour groups, but the staff remains friendly and expedient. The hotel is sufficiently

self-contained, with all of the basic amenities and ser vices, an outdoor pool, and a good restaurant.

Rte. 6, Phum Sala Kanseng, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/964-301.** Fax 063/964-302. www.angkor-hotel-cambodia.com. 169 units. $85 (£57) deluxe; $130 (£87) club; $170 (£113) suite. V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; basic gym; tours; business center w/Internet access; shopping; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe.

Angkor Village Hotel ★★ For comfortable, rustic atmosphere, Angkor Village is without rival. Located in a quiet neighborhood not far from the main market, this hideaway is a unique maze of wood bungalows connected by covered boardwalks surrounding a picturesque pond. Rooms have high bamboo ceilings, wood beams, built-in cabinetry, and decorative touches such as traditional Khmer shadow puppets and statuary. Top units have balconies overlooking the central pond. Bathrooms are all large, with combination tub/showers and sinks set in oversize ceramic cauldrons. The central lobby is a series of platforms and private sitting areas, a good place to rest after a day at the temples. The pool is small but picturesque, set in a verdant courtyard at the rear. L'Auberge de Temples, on a small island in the central pond, serves fine French and Khmer cuisine. The hotel's **Apsara Theatre Restaurant,** just outside the gate, has Khmer-style banquet dining and performances of Khmer Apsara dancing nightly. The whole property is infused with Khmer culture and hospitality—be sure to book ahead, as it's often full. In fact, the hotel is so popular that it's expanded; see the Angkor Village Resort, below.

Wat Bo Rd., Siem Reap. ✆ **063/963-5613.** Fax 063/963-363. www.angkorvillage.com. 52 units. High season $109–$179 (£73–£119) double; low season $89–$149 (£59–£99) double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; limited room service; laundry service; small library. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Angkor Village Resort ★★ Kids This place brings all of the taste and class of the Angkor Village Hotel (see above) into a resort atmosphere. A serpentine pool, hidden by lush gardens, is its premier attraction, but the Khmer architecture, attention to detail in local wood, and spacious breathing room all make it a good bet. Room rates are the same for bottom- or top-floor rooms, but the top floor is a better choice, with four-poster beds and higher ceilings reminiscent of a Khmer home. The resort is a bit off the beaten path, but not far from the town center, and is linked to its sister hotel and her offerings.

Phum Traeng. Siem Reap. ✆ **063/963-561.** Fax 063/963-363. www.angkorvillage.com. 80 units. $199–$209 (£133–£139) high season; $169 (£113) low season. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; laundry service; small library. *In room:* A/C, dataport, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Shinta Mani ★ Shinta Mani is both a small boutique hotel and a school of hospitality. One of its goals is to create opportunities in health, beauty, and hospitality professions for the next generation of underprivileged kids in Siem Reap. While the public spaces are done on a small scale—the pool is quite tiny—fine guest rooms and cool minimalist decor set this place apart. Each unit is large and stylish, with cool tile and polished wood features. Bathrooms connect to the guest rooms via large sliding doors. The overall effect is chic, clean, and luxurious.

Junction of Oum Khum and 14th St. (near FCC), Siem Reap. ✆ **063/761-998.** Fax 063/761-999. www.shintamani.com. 18 units. $100–$140 (£67–£93) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; limited room service; massage; laundry service; library w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, safe.

Moderate

FCC Angkor ★ This hotel is located beside the popular restaurant of the same name. Herb and fruit-named rooms (Basil, Lychee, and so on) have low beds on wooden frames, and the decor is decidedly modern—flatscreen TVs, geometric Scandinavian-style furniture, vases stuffed with wooden sticks, and canvas block color paintings on the walls. The bathrooms are top-notch. There's a long and narrow outdoor pool, and all rooms come with either poolside or garden balconies.

Pokambor Ave. (next to the Royal Residence and just north of the post office). ✆ **063/760-280.** Fax 063/760-281 www.fcccambodia.com. 31 units. $120–$160 (£80–£107) pool view; $100–$140 (£67–£93) garden view; $270 (£180) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor salt water pool; laundry. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV/DVD, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe.

Salina Hotel ★ This recently renovated and expanded hotel is popular with tour groups and offers clean, utilitarian comfort. Affordable rates bring 'em in, in droves. The new pool at this unpretentious three-star is small but cozy. Rooms are clean, large, and well appointed, with fresh carpeting, wood furnishings, and that new-car smell. Bathrooms are small but tidy. The staff is friendly and can help arrange necessities, including guides and rentals. This is an overall good value, but there's little atmosphere to speak of.

#125, Rd. 6, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/380-221.** Fax 063/380-224. www.salinahotel.net. 154 units. $55–$65 (£37–£43) double; $120 (£80) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; small gym; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

Viroth's Hotel ★★ Value A hotel that is this chic and this cheap is a rarity. The hotel is owned by Viroth, originally from Sihanoukville, and his partner, Fabian, a long-time French expat. The hotel is a small boutique affair, making for a private, intimate experience. Rooms are minimalist and modern: cool gray stone floors, white walls, sleek geometric furniture. But soft touches such as a floor vase of dried palm leaves, dark-brown leather desk tops, and coffee-colored duvet covers keep it warm and inviting. One corner is painted a contrasting maroon color and marks the shower console. Most rooms have private balconies. Partially open gray terrazzo showers come with rain showerheads. The best room in the house is no. 3, on the ground floor. It comes with a large, poolside terrace and cozy lounge beds. The rooftop restaurant is lit with fairy lights at night and is an excellent place to spend the evening, looking out over the rooftops of Siem Reap. This hotel is highly recommended.

0658 Wat Bo Village (behind City River Hotel). ✆ **063/951-800.** Fax 063/761-720. www.viroth-hotel.com. 7 units. High season $80 (£53); low season $60 (£40). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant and bar; small outdoor pool; small spa; rooftop Jacuzzi; laundry; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, room service, in-house phone only.

Inexpensive

The downtown area of Siem Reap, on either side of the main road, is brimming with budget accommodations.

Auberge Mont Royal d'Angkor ★★ Kids Down a lazy lane just to the west of the town center, this quiet inn is a much better choice than the larger tourist hotels in this category. The cozy, Canadian-owned and -managed hotel features a genial staff, inviting restaurant, and standard rooms that are quite chic for the low price tag. Terra-cotta tile covers the open areas, while atmospheric touches include canvas lamps, carved wood

beds, and traditional hangings, curtains, and bedspreads. The traditional decor is pleasant and inviting. Bathrooms are done in clean tile, but aren't particularly large or luxe. Deluxe rooms are worth the upgrade.

497 Taphul, P.O. Box 34, west of town center, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/964-044.** www.auberge-mont-royal.com. 30 units. $33 (£22) standard; $56 (£37) deluxe double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; car rental; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, no phone.

Bopha Angkor ★ With its popular nightly dance show and Khmer restaurant, there is a certain cultural-theme-park vibe to this place, but nevertheless, Bopha Angkor is tidy, affordable, and quite genuine about providing a culturally infused visit to Siem Reap. Rooms are arranged in a U-shaped courtyard around a lush garden. Private spaces are large and feature fun local accents such as mossy nets and souvenir-shop trinkets on the walls. Bathrooms are small. The hotel is close to the Old Market area.

#0512, Acharsvar St. (across canal from market), Siem Reap. ✆ **063/964-928.** Fax 063/964-446. www.bopha-angkor.com. 38 units. $55–$89 (£37–£59) double; $180 (£120) suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge.

La Noria ★★ With a similar sister property, Borann Auberge de Temples, La Noria is a mellow group of bungalows connected by a winding garden path. The guesthouse is near the town center, but you wouldn't know it in the hush of this little laid-back spot. Rooms are basic but tidy, with pleasing traditional decor and nice touches such as terra-cotta floors, wooden trim, small balconies, and fine hangings and details such as shadow puppets and authentic Khmer furniture. Bathrooms are small but clean, with a guesthouse-style shower-in-room setup. The place is light on amenities, though it does have a small pool and makes up for any deficiency with gobs of charm. The open-air restaurant is a highlight, serving good Khmer and French food. The hotel is affiliated with Krousar Thmey "New Family," a humanitarian group doing good work, and there is a helpful information board about rural travel and humanitarian projects.

Down small lane off Rte. 6 to the northeast of town, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/964-242.** Fax 063/964-243. 28 units. www.lanoriaangkor.com. $31 (£21) with fan; $41 (£27) with A/C. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; laundry service; Internet access. *In room:* A/C (optional).

Passagio ★ This unpretentious little workhorse of a hotel is convenient to downtown and adjoins its own helpful travel agent, Lolei Travel. Rooms are large and tidy and not much more, but that's the beauty here: three floors that are something like an American motel, complete with tacky hotel art. The one suite has a bathtub; all others have stand-up showers in bathrooms that are nondescript. The friendly staff can arrange any detail and is eager to please.

Watdamanak Village (across river to east of town), Siem Reap. ✆ **063/760-324.** Fax 063/760-163. 17 units. www.passagio-hotel.com. $36–$47 (£24–£31) double; $62 (£41) family room. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (breakfast only); travel agent; car rental; free airport pickup; business center w/Internet access; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, no phone.

Pavillon Indochine ★★ This converted traditional Khmer house and garden is the closest you'll get to the temples. It's quite peaceful, even isolated, in a quiet neighborhood. Really it's an upscale guesthouse, charming and surprisingly self-contained, with a good restaurant and a friendly, knowledgeable French proprietor whose staff can help arrange any detail in the area. Just a few years old, the rooms are large, clean, and airy, with terra-cotta tile and wood trim. The courtyard has a picturesque garden dotted by quiet sitting areas with chairs or floor mats and comfy pillows. A good information corner lists the current happenings in town and at the temples.

Wat Thmei, on back r oad to temples, Siem Reap . ✆ **012/804-952.** w ww.pavillon-indochine.com. 24 units. $45–$65 (£30–£43) double; $60–$85 (£40–£57) suit e. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; car r ental; out door massage pa vilion; laundr y ser vice. *In r oom:* A/C, TV/DVD, saf e, no phone (mobile phone available upon request).

WHERE TO DINE

Dining in Siem Reap is not a pricey affair. In addition to the choices listed belo w, all of the major hotels hav e fine upscale r estaurants. The ar ea ar ound the O ld M arket is a cluster of storefront eateries, all affordable and laid-back.

Expensive

Le Bistrot de Siem Reap FRENCH ★★ This is the best French restaurant in Siem Reap. The atmosphere is wonder fully charming, with old F rench music playing lightly in the background, light-gray walls with a warm mar oon ceiling trim, and black lacquer tables with mixed wood and rattan chairs. The food is superb, such as the perfectly tender baby squid with confit tomato and pilaf rice. The wine list is a wor k in progress, so ask for a r ecommendation. They also hav e a good selection of C uban cigars. The walls ar e adorned with old posters advertising voyages to the Far East, but the cuisine is a culinary trip to France. It's a wonderful, tasty slice of old I ndochine.

Victoria Angkor Resort and Spa, Central Park, P.O. Box 93145, Siem Reap. ✆ **063/760-428.** Main courses $18–$26 (£12–£17). AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30–10:30pm.

Moderate

Abacus ASIAN/FRENCH ★ This restaurant is set in a traditional Cambodian stilt house. There is a central bar made of v olcanic stone and a fe w tables with rattan chairs on the first floor, underneath the house. Terrace seating upstairs is divided among various small, cozy rooms. The menu is written on a chalkboard and you can choose from a good selection of either Asian rice bo wls or Western mains with a couple of side dishes. The breaded fish is light and tender , ser ved with a tangy tamarind sauce, the eggplant is grilled with r osemary and cracked pepper (ask them to go easy on the salt), and the sautéed spinach with chopped garlic is a good, healthy injection of gr eenery—a lo vely meal and a steal at $7.50 (£5).

Oum Khun St. ✆ **012/644-286.** Main courses $5–$17 (£3.30–£11). No credit cards. Daily 11am–late.

Chivit Thai ★★ THAI This is authentic Thai in an atmospheric, traditional wood house. The food is great, the prices are low (try one of the set menus), and ther e's casual floor seating and a r ustic but comfor table dining r oom, r omantic in the candlelight. Name your favorite Thai dish, and they do it here—and do it well. The *tom yum* (sweet, spicy Thai soup) is excellent.

House #129, Rd . 6, nex t to Angkor Hot el. ✆ **012/830-761.** Main c ourses $2.50–$5 (£1.65–£3.30). No credit cards. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club) ★★ CONTINENTAL The glowing white modern cube of the FCC would be at home in a nouv eau riche California suburb or a Jacques Tati film, but it is a bit jarring canal-side in the center of S iem Reap. The first floor offers boutique shopping, while the second floor is an elegant open space with high ceilings: a modern colonial. You'll find an Art Deco bar, low lounge chairs at the center, and standard dining space on the balcony. The main r oom is flanked on one end b y an open kitchen. The FCC is the to wn's r unway and hosts numer ous functions as w ell as live music. The menu is the same as that of the original FCC in Phnom Penh, with good

soups, salads, and Western standards such as pasta, steak, and wood-fired pizza. The staff still can't believe they work here, and service is hot and cold but friendly. It has wireless Internet access and is the de facto Starbucks in Siem Reap. Even if it's just for drinks, you won't want to miss this place.

Pokambor Ave. (next to the Royal Residence). ✆ **063/760-280.** www.fcccambodia.com. Main courses $8–$24 (£5.30–£16). MC, V. Daily 6am–midnight.

Madame Butterfly ★★ KHMER/THAI Serving the finest authentic Khmer- and Thai-influenced cuisine in town, Madame Butterfly is very pleasant—its setting alone is worth a visit. Located in a converted traditional wooden home, the seating is in low rattan chairs and the decor is characterized by a tasteful collection of Buddhist and Khmer artifacts. The whole effect is casually romantic. The menu reads like a short course in local cuisine, heavy on the curries and hot pot dishes. The helpful staff and French proprietor will gladly explain the daily specials. Look for the delicious poached fish in coconut sauce with sticky rice; the divine *masaman* curry; or the rich *mchou pous,* a chicken-and-shrimp bisque. For a leisurely evening, this is a great pick.

Short ride west on Airport Rd. #6. ✆ **016/909-607.** Lunch is by reservation only. Main courses $3–$10 (£2–£6.65); set menu from $13 (£8.65). MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 5:30–10:30pm.

The Red Piano ★★ INTERNATIONAL Ever since Angelina Jolie and the cast and crew of the film *Tomb Raider II* made this their second home while filming at the temples, this atmospheric corner bar and restaurant has been "the place" to be in town. Imported steaks, spaghetti, sandwiches, salads, and international specialties such as Indian *samosas* or chicken *cordon bleu* round out a great menu of familiar fare. This place is always hoppin' late into the evening; due to popular demand (reservations aren't accepted), they've expanded onto a second floor. Renovations throughout have created a tidy, upscale charm. The best choice in town.

50m (164 ft.) northwest of the Old Market. ✆ **063/963-240.** Main courses $3.75–$9.75 (£2.50–£6.50). No credit cards. Daily 7am–midnight.

The Sugar Palm ★★ TRADITIONAL KHMER This is the place where food and beverage managers from nearby five-star hotels come to feast. Sugar Palm occupies the second floor of a spacious house and offers a warm and inviting ambience with subdued, covered lighting, a wall painted in sunny yellow, and vaulted ceilings. The furniture and bar are done in dark sugar palm wood. Most of the seating is on the wraparound balcony, partially covered from the outside world with roll-down bamboo blinds. On the menu, the pomelo salad is excellent (fleshy pomelo tendrils are played off the sharp taste of dried shrimp and crunchy chopped peanuts; strips of spicy red pepper give it an extra kick). For an entree, try the chicken stir-fried with ginger.

Ta Phul Rd. (400m/1,312 ft. south of the Caltex gas station). ✆ **063/964-838.** Main courses $4–$6 (£2.65–£4). MC, V. Daily 11:30am–3pm and 5:30–11pm. Bar stays open to late.

Viroth's Restaurant ★★ KHMER Like its sister hotel two streets down (see above), Viroth's Restaurant boasts a sleek and stylish interior. The French and Khmer owners were the original purveyors of popular Angkor Café (see "Dining at the Temples" below). Unlike the hotel, which is still a secret among those in the know, the restaurant is well known and well loved. The food is traditional Khmer cuisine and mighty tasty. The amok fish is a perfect blend of coconut milk and lemon grass and, unlike at other restaurants, the fish is completely deboned. The spacious dining area is on a raised wooden platform and flanked on one side by a wall of bamboo rods. Ceiling and floor

fans keep a cool breeze going and send ripples through the strips of sheer saffron sheets suspended from the ceiling and hanging between tables. The dessert menu is Western—if it's available, try the lime sorbet, which comes with thin strips of zesty lime rind.

246 Wat Bo St. (behind La Résidence Hotel) ✆ **063/760-774.** Main courses $3–$5.50 (£2–£3.65). MC, V. Daily 10am–2pm and 5–10pm.

Inexpensive

Khmer Kitchen Restaurant ★★ KHMER This busy little storefront is hidden down an alley on the north end of the Old Market, but still draws a busy crowd for big portions of simple, delicious Khmer fare. Good curries and Khmer stir-fries share menu space with unique dishes such as baked pumpkin. It's about the food here, not the service—but these folks are friendly enough, considering how busy they usually are.

Down alley just north of the Old Market. ✆ **012/763-468.** Main courses $2.50–$3.50 (£1.65–£2.30). No credit cards. Daily noon–midnight.

The Soup Dragon ★ VIETNAMESE/KHMER This long-running street-side cafe in the center of the Old Market area serves good Khmer and Western dishes, though its fame comes from authentic Vietnamese fare such as *pho,* fresh spring rolls, and all manner of wok-fried dishes. Two floors of open-air dining overlook the busy street at the center of town. It's always packed, making this a good place to meet up with other travelers.

#369 Group 6, Mondol 1 (north of the Central Market). ✆ **063/964-933.** Main courses $2.50–$8 (£1.65–£5.30). No credit cards. Daily 6am–10pm.

Dining at the Temples

Across the busy parking lot closest to Angkor Wat, you're sure to spot the snazzy **Angkor Café** (✆ **012/946-227**). This little gallery and souvenir shop serves—for a mint by Khmer standards—good coffee, tea, and sandwiches.

For a very affordable and hearty meal while touring the temples, try **Sunrise Angkor** (✆ **012/946-595**), one of many open-air eateries and the first one you'll see behind and to the left of Angkor Café. It has good breakfasts for very low prices.

In and among all the major temples, you'll see lots of small, bamboo-roofed eateries, and all will implore you to enter. The competition means that you have more leverage when haggling: "Are you sure this Coke is $2? Someone over there said it was . . . " You get the picture.

Snacks & Cafes

For a good breakfast, real coffee, baked goods, and snacks, try **Blue Pumpkin** (#365, Mondol 1; ✆ **063/963-574**), a posh cafe north of the market that's also a great stop for sandwiches to go (perfect for a temple picnic).

Butterflies Garden Restaurant ★ Don't miss this netted enclosure with a butterfly farm and meticulous menagerie of local flora and fauna, including a pond filled with Japanese carp. There are detailed descriptions of all plants and some individual butterflies. The restaurant serves drinks and offers a small lunch menu.

Just across the Siem Reap River north of the Old Market. ✆ **063/761-211.** Entrance costs $2 (£1.30). No credit cards. Daily 8am–5pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Angkor Wat is the Disneyland of Buddhist temples in Asia. The temple complex covers 97 sq. km (37 sq. miles) and requires at least a few busy days to thoroughly explore the

major sites. Everyone has his or her favorite, but a few must-sees are highlighted below. Be sure to plan carefully and catch a sunrise or sunset from one of the more prime spots; it's a photographer's dream. ***Note:*** The temples are magnificent, and days spent clambering around are inherently interesting, but be careful not to come away from a visit to ancient Angkor with a memory of an oversize rock collection or jungle gym. There's much to learn about Buddhism, Hinduism, architecture, and Khmer history; it's useful to hire a well-informed guide or join a tour group. There are also subtleties to temple touring, and a good guide is your best chance to beat the crowds and catch the intricacies, or be in the right place for the magic moments of the day. Contact your hotel front desk or one of the tour agencies listed at the beginning of this section.

The Temples

Entrance fees for Angkor Wat are as follows: A 1-day ticket is $20 (£13), a 3-day ticket is $40 (£27), and a 1-week ticket is $60 (£40). Tickets are good for all sites within the main temple compound, as well as Banteay Srei, to the north, and the outlying temples of the Roluos Group.

Angkor Wat ★★★ The symbol of Cambodia, the four spires of the main temple of Angkor are known the world over. In fact, this is the most resplendent of the Angkor sites, one certainly not to miss even on the most perfunctory of tours.

Built under the reign of Suryavarman II in the 12th century, this temple, along with Bayon and Baphuon, is the pinnacle of Khmer architecture. From base to tip of the highest tower, it's 213m (669 ft.) of awe-inspiring stone in the definitive, elaborate Khmer style.

The famous bas-reliefs encircling the temple on the first level depict the mythical "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," a legend in which Hindu deities stir vast oceans in order to extract the elixir of immortality. This churning produced the Apsaras, Hindu celestial dancers, which can be seen on many temples.

The most measured and studied of all the sites, Angkor Wat is the subject of much speculation: It's thought to represent Mount Meru, home of Hindu gods and a land of creation and destruction. Researchers measuring the site in *hat,* ancient Khmer units of measure, deduce that the symmetry of the building corresponds with the timeline of the Hindu ages—as a map or calendar of the universe, if you will. The approach from the main road crosses the *baray* (reservoir) and is an ascending progression of three levels to the inner sanctum. The T-shirt hawkers are relentless, and the tricky steps and temple height are a challenge to those with vertigo, but the short trip is inspiring and the views from the top are breathtaking. ***Note:*** There is a guide rope on the southern face (and often a long line up).

Angkor Thom ★★★ The temple name means "the great city" in Khmer and is famed for its fantastic 45m (148-ft.) central temple, Bayon. The vast area of Angkor Thom, over a mile on one side, is dotted with many temples and features; don't miss the elaborate reliefs of the **Terrace of the Leper King** and the **Terrace of Elephants.**

The **Bayon** is a Buddhist temple built under a later king, Jayavarman VII (1190), but the temple nevertheless adheres to Hindu cosmology and can be read as a metaphor for the natural world. It has four huge stone faces, with one facing out and keeping watch at each compass point. The curious smiling image, thought by many to be a depiction of Jayavarman himself, is often considered the enigmatic Mona Lisa of Southeast Asia. Bayon is also surrounded by two long walls with bas-relief scenes of legendary and historic events,

Moments The Magic Hours at Angkor Wat

The skies over Angkor always put on a show. With just a little planning, you can see the dawn or the day's afterglow framed in temple spires, glowing off the main *wat*, or reflected in one of the temple reservoirs. Photographers will swoon. Here are a few hints for catching the magic hours at the temples.

The sunrise and sunset views from the upper terraces of **Angkor Wat,** the main temple, are among the best, though it's a tough climb for some. At dusk, temple staff start clearing the main temple area just as the sun dips. Smile, avoid them, and try to stay for the afterglow.

For the classic photographers' view of the main temple, Angkor Wat, at sunset—with the image of the temple reflected in a pool—enter the first wall of the temple compound, walk halfway down the front gangway, and then take a right, down a set of stairs, and out into the field. The view from the water's edge, with warm light bouncing off the temple, is stunning.

It's a bit crowded, but the views from **Phnom Bakeng (Bakeng Hill),** just a short drive past the entrance to Angkor Wat, are amazing at both sunrise and sunset. It's a good little climb up the hill; those so inclined can go by elephant.

The open area on the eastern side of **Banteay Kdey** looks over one of Angkor's many reservoirs, this one full and a great reflective pool for the rising glow at sunrise.

For the best view of the temples, hands down, contact **Helicopters Cambodia Ltd.** ★ at ✆ **023/213-706.** For a hefty fee, you can see the sites from any angle you choose. Balloon rides are also available.

probably painted and gilded originally. There are 51 smaller towers surrounding Bayon, each with four faces of its own.

Just north of the Bayon is the stalwart form of the **Baphuon,** a temple built in 1066 that is in the process of being put back together in a protractive effort that gives visitors an idea of what original temple construction might have been like.

Ta Prohm ★★★ The jungle foliage still has its hold on this dynamic temple. Ta Prohm was the only one that was left in such a ruinous state when early archaeologists freed the rest of the Angkor Wat temples from the jungle. Ta Prohm is a favorite for many; in fact, the ruinous roots appeal to most. As large around as some tree trunks, the roots of fig, banyan, and kapok trees cleave massive stones in two or give way and grow over the top of temple ramparts. It's quite dramatic, and there are a few popular photo spots where the collision of temple and vine are most impressive. Sadly, Ta Prohm was looted quite heavily in recent years, and many of its stone reliquaries have been lost.

Attractions Farther Afield

Banteay Srei ★★ True temple buffs won't want to miss this distinct complex: The 10th-century buildings of Banteay Srei are done in a style unique to the high spires of Angkor. The site is a collection of low walls surrounding low-rise peaked structures of

deep-red sandstone. Translated as the "Citadel of Women," it has well-preserved relief carvings on the squat central buildings and intricate tellings of ancient Hindu tales. Go with a guide who can explain the finer details of temple inscriptions.

32km (20 miles) north of the main temples of Angkor Wat.

Kabal Spean (Finds) Known as the "River of a Thousand Linga" (a *linga* is a phallic symbol representing the Hindu god Shiva), Kabal Spean lay undiscovered by Westerners until a French researcher stumbled across it recently. Dating from the early 11th century, the relief carvings that line the streambeds are said to purify the water before it fills the reservoirs (called *barays*) of Angkor. It's the journey here that's really interesting, along rough roads through rural villages north of Banteay Srei, and there's also a fun 30-minute forest hike to the first waterfall. Khmer folks come to picnic, and it's a good spot to swim or follow the path that trips along the brook; from there, you can view the many carvings in relief on the banks and creek bed.

5km (3 miles) north of Banteay Srei. Admission $3 (£2).

Land Mines Museum You won't find signs leading you to this seemingly impromptu museum; Cambodian officials prefer their own rhetoric to that of the owner and curator, Mr. Akira. The museum itself is just a corrugated-roof area stacked high with disarmed ordnance and detailed data on the country's UXO (unexploded ordnance). Most interesting is the small grove out back, an exhibit of how mines are placed in a real jungle setting. The museum is a call to action for demining in the country. Resist any temptation to volunteer (unless properly trained), but you can chat with Mr. Akira, peruse his recent book on the subject, and sign a petition (he's hoping to achieve NGO status). It's an interesting visit.

On the main road to the temples, just before the checkpoint and a few miles east. Free admission (voluntary contributions). Daily 7am–5pm. Go by motorbike or taxi.

Roluos Group These three temples are best viewed in the context of Angkor architecture's progression, as the forefathers of the more dynamic of Angkor's main temples. A visit to these temples is included in the main temple ticket, but will cost you a bit extra for transport.

13km (8 miles) east of the town center.

SHOPPING

The **Old Market,** in the center of Siem Reap, is the best place to find Buddhist trinkets, souvenirs such as T-shirts, and even good books on the temples. Just outside the market, you'll see a whole array of small storefront boutiques.

Large, mall-style souvenir venues line the road just north of town on the way to the temples. These are a good stop for the obligatory collector's spoon or plastic replica of the temples.

The **Lazy Mango Bookshop,** a block west of the Old Market (lazymangobooks@yahoo.com), is where you can exchange that novel you've been dragging around for a new one.

SIEM REAP AFTER DARK

Siem Reap is a town where most visitors are up with the sun and out visiting the temple sites, but there are a few good evening options.

Apsara dance is an ancient art in Cambodia. Dancers in traditional gilded costumes practice their slow art, characterized by the elegant contortions of the wrists. Combined

with a fine buffet dinner in the traditional indoor banquet-house theater, this is a fun evening out. Contact the folks at the **Angkor Village** (✆ **063/963-5613**) to make reservations for the nightly show. The **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor** (✆ **063/963-888**) has a similar show in an open pavilion on the lawn. At both, dinner begins at 7pm; the show starts at 7:30pm. Tickets cost $22 (£13) and $32 (£18), respectively. **Dr. Beat (Beatocello) Richner** plays the works of Bach and some of his own comic pieces between stories and vignettes about his work as director of the **Kanth Bopha Foundation** (www.beat-richner.ch), a humanitarian hospital just north of the town center. Admission is free, but donations are accepted in support of their valiant efforts to serve a steady stream of destitute patients, mostly children, who suffer from treatable diseases such as tuberculosis. Dr. Richner is as passionate about his music as he is about his cause. You're in for an enjoyable, informative evening. Performances are every Thursday and Saturday at 7:15pm, just north of the town center on the road to the temples.

There are a few popular bars near the Old Market in Siem Reap. The **Warehouse** (✆ **063/965-204**) is a popular new addition that draws a steady crowd. **Linga** (✆ **012/246-912** or 063/965-321; www.lingabar.com) prides itself on its traditional Fidel Castro mojito. The **Angkor What?** (Pub St., 1 block west of the Old Market; ✆ **012/490-755**) is a solid standby, and next door the **Easy Speaking Café and Pub** handles the spillover. The whole street, in fact, hops late into the evening. Nearby, the funky, black-lit **Laundry,** on a side street to the north of the Old Market, has good special events. **Dead Fish Tower** (✆ **012/630-6377**), on the main road heading toward the temples, is set up like the rigging of a tall ship, with precarious perches, funky nooks, and unique drinks.

8

Singapore

by Jennifer Eveland

A fascinating mix of contrasts, Singapore lies at the crossroads of East and West, and as a result, it hums with a unique culture that is equal parts Oriental and occidental. Founded by an adventurer who was searching for the epicenter of global trade, early Singapore drew waves of immigrant traders, investors, laborers, and adventurers from all corners of the world. Some 200 years later, Singapore is still fulfilling its original role, with one of the busiest shipping ports on earth, a multicultural native population, and fresh waves of new immigrants and expatriates from countries far and wide. True to its heritage, Singapore has always been, and always will be, a nation that blends the best of all worlds into one nation.

It is understandable for a visitor to feel as if Singapore has sold its Asian soul in exchange for a Western lifestyle. On the surface, the terrain is distinctly consumer driven; its rows of shiny shopping malls flank wide, manicured avenues dotted with McDonald's and Starbucks. At rush hour, the flow of office workers forms an endless river of black business suits and BlackBerrys through the Mass Rapid Transit system into the downtown Central Business District. A modern metropolis, Singapore is a city on the move, with places to go and people to see.

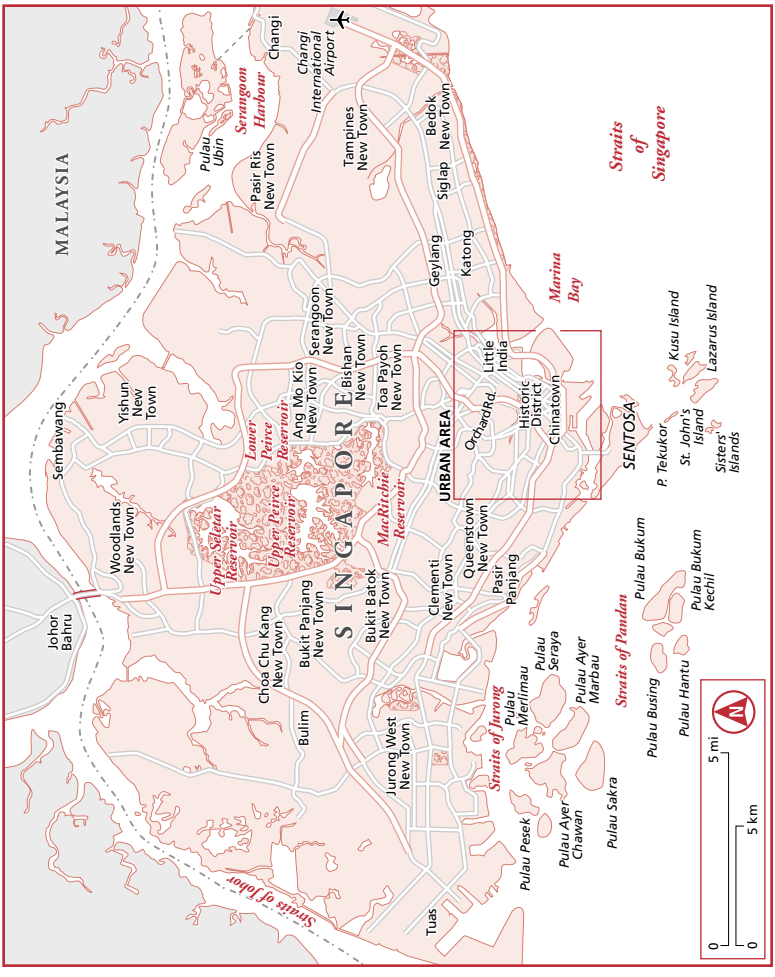
But for those who pause to take a closer look, Singapore's cultural heart is alive and well beneath the polished veneer. Singapore's Chinese are still driven by ancient values that respect the family, authority, and success merited by hard work. Its Malays share openly their warm ideals of generosity, hospitality, and joy among friends and family. And the city's Indians possess a culture steeped in thousands of years of traditional beauty and passion for life. Add to this the spirit of Arabs and Armenians, Bugis and British, various Europeans and Eurasians, and many more—a multitude of cultures that, combined, defines what it means to be Singaporean.

Singapore strives to honor its past while keeping one eye firmly focused on the future. Amid its efforts to grow the nation's economy and its people's standard of living are huge plans for tourism development. In recent years, the city has completely revamped the Singapore History Museum and has added the Singapore Flyer to its repertoire.

1 GETTING TO KNOW SINGAPORE

THE LAY OF THE LAND

On a world map, Singapore is nothing more than a speck nestled in the heart of Southeast Asia, at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula. In the north, it's linked to Malaysia by a causeway over the Strait of Johor, which is its only physical connection to any other body



of land. The country is made up of one main island, S ingapore, and around 60 smaller ones, some of which—S entosa, Pulau Ubin, Kusu, and S t. John's Island—are popular retreats. The main island is shaped like a flat, horiz ontal diamond, measuring in at just more than 42km (26 miles) fr om east to w est and almost 23km (14 miles) nor th to south. With a total land ar ea of only 585 sq. km (228 sq. miles), S ingapore is almost shockingly tiny.

Singapore's geographical position, sitting appr oximately 137km (85 miles) nor th of the Equator, means that its climate features uniform temperatures, plentiful rainfall, and high humidity.

Singapore is a city-state, which basically means the city *is* the country. The urban center starts at the Singapore River at the southern point of the island. Within the urban center are neighborhoods that are handy for visitors to become familiar with: the Historic District, Chinatown, Orchard Road, Kampong Glam, and Little India.

THE CITY The urban center of Singapore stretches broadly from edge to edge, so walking from one end to the other, say from Kampong Glam to Chinatown, will be too much for a relaxed walk. But within each neighborhood, the best way to explore is by foot, wandering along picturesque streets, in and out of shops and museums.

The main focal point of the city is the **Singapore River,** which on a map is located at the southern point of the island, flowing west to east into a marina. It's along the banks of this river that Sir Stamford Raffles landed and built his settlement for the East India Trading Company. As trade prospered, the banks of the river were expanded to handle commerce, behind which neighborhoods and administrative offices took root. In 1822, he developed a town plan which allocated neighborhoods to each of the races who'd come in droves to find work and begin lives. The lines drawn then remain today, shaping the major ethnic enclaves held within the city limits.

On the south bank of the river, go-downs, or warehouses, lined the waterside. Behind, offices and residences sprang up for the Chinese community of merchants and "coolie" laborers who worked the river and sea trade. Raffles named this section **Chinatown,** a name that stands today.

Neighboring Chinatown to the southwest is **Tanjong Pagar,** a small district where wealthy Chinese and Eurasians built plantations and manors. With the development of the steamship, Keppel Harbour, a deep natural harbor just off the shore of Tanjong Pagar, was built up to receive the larger vessels. Tanjong Pagar quickly developed into a commercial and residential area filled with workers who flocked there to support the industry.

In the early days, both Chinatown and Tanjong Pagar were amazing sights of city activity. Row houses lined the streets, with shops on the bottom floors and homes on the second and third. Chinese coolie laborers commonly lived 16 to a room, and the area flourished with gambling casinos, clubs, and opium dens in which they spent their spare time and money. Indians also thronged to the area to work on the docks, a small reminder that although races had their own areas, they were never exclusive communities.

As recently as the 1970s, a walk down the streets in this area was an adventure. The shops housed Chinese craftspeople and artists. On the streets, hawkers peddled food and other merchandise. Calligrapher scribes set up shop on sidewalks to write letters for a fee. Housewives bustled through their daily errands. Overhead, laundry hung from bamboo poles.

Today, both of these districts are sleepy in comparison. New towns offering affordable housing have siphoned residents off to the suburbs, and though the government has renovated many of the old shophouses in an attempt to preserve history, they're now occupied by law offices and architectural, public relations, and advertising firms. About the only time you'll see this place hustle anymore is during weekday lunchtime, when all the professionals dash out for a bite.

The **north bank** was originally reserved for colonial administrative buildings and is today commonly referred to as the **Historic District.** The center point was the Padang, the field on which the Europeans would play sports and hold outdoor ceremonies. Around the field, the Parliament Building, Supreme Court, City Hall, and other municipal buildings sprang up in grand style. Government Hill, the present-day **Fort Canning Hill,** was home of the governors. The Esplanade along the waterfront was a center for European social activities and music gatherings, when colonials would don their finest

Western styles and walk the park under parasols or cruise in horse-drawn carriages. These days, the Historic District is still the center of most of the government's operations and home to numerous high-rise hotels and shopping malls. The area on the bank of the river is celebrated as Raffles's landing site.

To the northwest of the Historic District, in the area along **Orchard Road** and **Tanglin,** a residential area was created for Europeans and Eurasians. Homes and plantations were eventually replaced by apartment buildings and shops, and in the early 1970s, luxury hotels ushered tourism into the area in full force. In the 1980s, huge malls were erected along the sides of Orchard Road, turning the Orchard-scape into the shopping hub it continues to be. The Tanglin area is home to most of the foreign embassies in Singapore.

The landscape of **Little India** made it a natural location for an Indian settlement. Indians were the original cattle hands and traders in Singapore, and this area's grasses and springs provided their cattle with food and water, while bamboo groves supplied necessary lumber for their pens. Later, with the establishment of brick kilns, Indian construction laborers flocked to the area to find work. Today, many elements of Indian culture persist, although Indians make up a small percentage of the current population. Shops, restaurants, and temples still serve the community, and on Sundays Little India is a true mob scene, when all the workers have a day off and come to the streets here to socialize and relax.

Neighboring Little India, **Kampong Glam** was given to Sultan Hussein and his family as part of his agreement to turn Singapore over to Raffles. Here he built his Istana (palace) and the Sultan Mosque, and the area subsequently filled with Malay and Arab Muslims who imported a distinct Islamic flavor to the neighborhood. The area is still a focal point of Muslim society in Singapore thanks to Sultan Mosque, and the Istana has recently been opened as a new exhibit celebrating Malay culture. **Arab Street** is a regular draw for both tourists and locals, who come to find deals on fabrics and local and regional crafts.

Two areas of the city center are relatively new, having been built atop huge parcels of reclaimed land. Where the eastern edges of Chinatown and Tanjong Pagar once touched the water's edge, land reclamation created the present-day downtown business district, which is named after its central thoroughfare, **Shenton Way.** This Wall Street–like district is home to the magnificent skyscrapers that grace Singapore's skyline, and to the banks and businesses that have made the place an international financial capital. During weekday business hours, Shenton Way is packed with scurrying businesspeople; after hours and on weekends, it's a quiet forest of concrete, metal, and glass.

The other area is **Marina Bay,** which will soon be the new focal point for the city. With the Shenton Way financial district on one side, the Historic District on another, and Suntec convention center on yet another, the bay is humming with activity. In the coming years, construction of one of Singapore's new casino-integrated resorts, office towers, and luxury condominiums on a tract of reclaimed land will completely encircle the bay, creating a vibrant arts and entertainment district.

OUTSIDE THE URBAN AREA The heart of Singapore centers around the Singapore River, but outside the city proper are suburban neighborhoods and rural areas. In the immediate outskirts of the main urban area are the older suburban neighborhoods, such as **Katong, Geyland,** and **Holland Village,** which feature prewar homes with charming architectural details. Beyond these are the newer suburbs, called **HDB New Towns.** The HDB, or Housing Development Board, is responsible for creating large towns, such as **Ang Mo Kio** and **Toa Payoh,** which are clusters of government-subsidized housing that

 have sprung up around the island, supported by their own shops, schools, and clinics, and many of them connected by the subway system.

ETIQUETTE

While in Singapore, try to use only your right hand in social interaction. In Indian and Islamic society, the left hand is used only for bathroom chores. Not only should you eat with your right hand and give and receive all gifts with your right hand, but you should make sure all gestures, especially pointing (particularly in temples and mosques), are made with your right hand. Also try to point with your knuckle rather than with your finger, to be more polite. Remember to remove your shoes before entering places of worship (except for churches and synagogues) and all private residences.

In cosmopolitan Singapore, most people will shake hands in greeting, but it's good to remember that Muslim women are not allowed to touch men to whom they are not related by blood or marriage. Unless they initiate a handshake, a simple smile and nod is fine.

Also, it's common for Singaporeans to exchange business cards. Always receive cards with two hands, and always treat the card with respect—don't stash it in your pocket without paying attention to it.

If you're touring during the day, shorts and a T-shirt are fine; however, if you plan to enter a temple or mosque, you will be required to cover your legs and upper arms. If you're dining in a restaurant or attending a business function, the dress code is "dress casual," meaning slacks and a pressed shirt for men, and a dress, slacks, or skirt for women. For most business meetings for men, a suit and tie are still necessary, but you needn't wear your jacket everywhere. For women, business suits are also expected.

If you would like to give a gift to a Singaporean, consult your hotel concierge for appropriate recommendations. For example, avoid giving sweets or foods to Muslim friends, unless you are certain the gift is *halal* (permitted within Islamic dietary practice). For the Chinese, it's trickier. Gifts should never be knives, clocks, handkerchiefs, or white flowers. (The sharp blades of knives symbolize the severing of a friendship; in Cantonese, the word for "clock" sounds the same as the word for "funeral"; handkerchiefs bring to mind tears and sadness; and white is the color of funeral mourning).

The main rules regarding table manners revolve around the use of chopsticks. Don't stick them upright in any dish, don't gesture with them, and don't suck on them. Dropped chopsticks are also considered bad luck. South Indian food can be eaten with your hands, but make sure you wash them first, and always use your right hand.

LANGUAGE

Singapore's four official languages are Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil, and English. Malay is the national language, while English is the language for government operations, law, and major financial transactions. Most Singaporeans are at least bilingual, with many speaking one or more dialects of Chinese, English, and some Malay.

2 THE BEST OF SINGAPORE IN 1 WEEK

If you've made it all the way to Southeast Asia, you'll likely be on a limited schedule—especially if you've arrived via a long-haul flight from Europe or North America. The good news is, Singapore is easy. It's such a small place that virtually every sight is relatively close. If your time is limited, bypass the museums and head straight for the streets, where

you'll find a "living museum" of sorts, with local people, food, shops, and places of worship, plus a couple of interesting cultural displays.

Days ❶–❷: Arrive in Singapore

After arriving in Singapore, allow yourself time to recover and spend time wandering through the city's streets. **Arab Street** is lined with shops that sell Malaysian and Indonesian batik cloth and home decor items, baskets, carved wood, objets d'art, and other gifts. Just off Arab Street, you can't miss the towering onion dome of the **Sultan Mosque.** The most historic in Singapore, its grounds are open, so feel free to explore within its walls, including the ablutions area. Take a walking tour of the **Historic District,** where you'll pass the Old Parliament House, the Padang, the Supreme Court, City Hall, and St. Andrew's Cathedral. Cool off in the afternoon at the **Asian Civilisations Museum.**

Days ❸–❹: Chinatown ★

Explore the sights of Chinatown and visit the **Chinatown Heritage Centre.** The streets surrounding the center are packed with souvenir shops with tons of curious finds, plus some beautiful art and antiques galleries, so be sure to wander around a bit. Spend some time at **Yue Hwa,** a Chinese emporium that is practically a museum of Chinese handicrafts, filled with floor after floor of fabulous shopping. Excellent buys here include ready-made silk clothing, embroidered handbags, carved jade, pottery, and cloisonné.

Day ❺: Little India ★★

Tour the temples and streets of Little India. **Serangoon Road** is the heart of Singapore's Indian community, a long strip where the locals come to buy spices, flowers, Bollywood DVDs, saris, and all kinds of ceremonial items, many of which make excellent gifts. This is one of the few old neighborhoods in Singapore that hasn't been "Disney-fied" by the government. Midway down Serangoon Road you'll find **Sri Veerama Kaliamman,** a brightly colored temple that hums with devotees all times of the day. Take off your shoes to explore the dioramas inside. Farther along Serangoon Road, **Mustapha's** is a crazy Indian emporium. Explore the basement sari-fabric department, one of the largest in Singapore. The groceries section is row after row of boxed curry mixes, and there are three floors of the most elaborate gold jewelry you've ever seen.

Day ❻: Natural Singapore ★★

Take an early morning stroll through the **Singapore Botanic Gardens.** You'll beat the heat and you won't feel rushed as you meander through the beautiful displays of tropical plants, shady trees, vivid blooms, and delicate bonsai. Don't forget to visit the National Orchid Garden (open at 8:30am) while you're there. Later, take in a rare chance to see nocturnal animals. **Night Safari** is the one place where all Singaporeans bring their foreign visitors, and it's rare for someone to walk away unimpressed. An easy dinner can be had from local and fast-food stalls at the park entrance.

Day ❼: Try to Leave

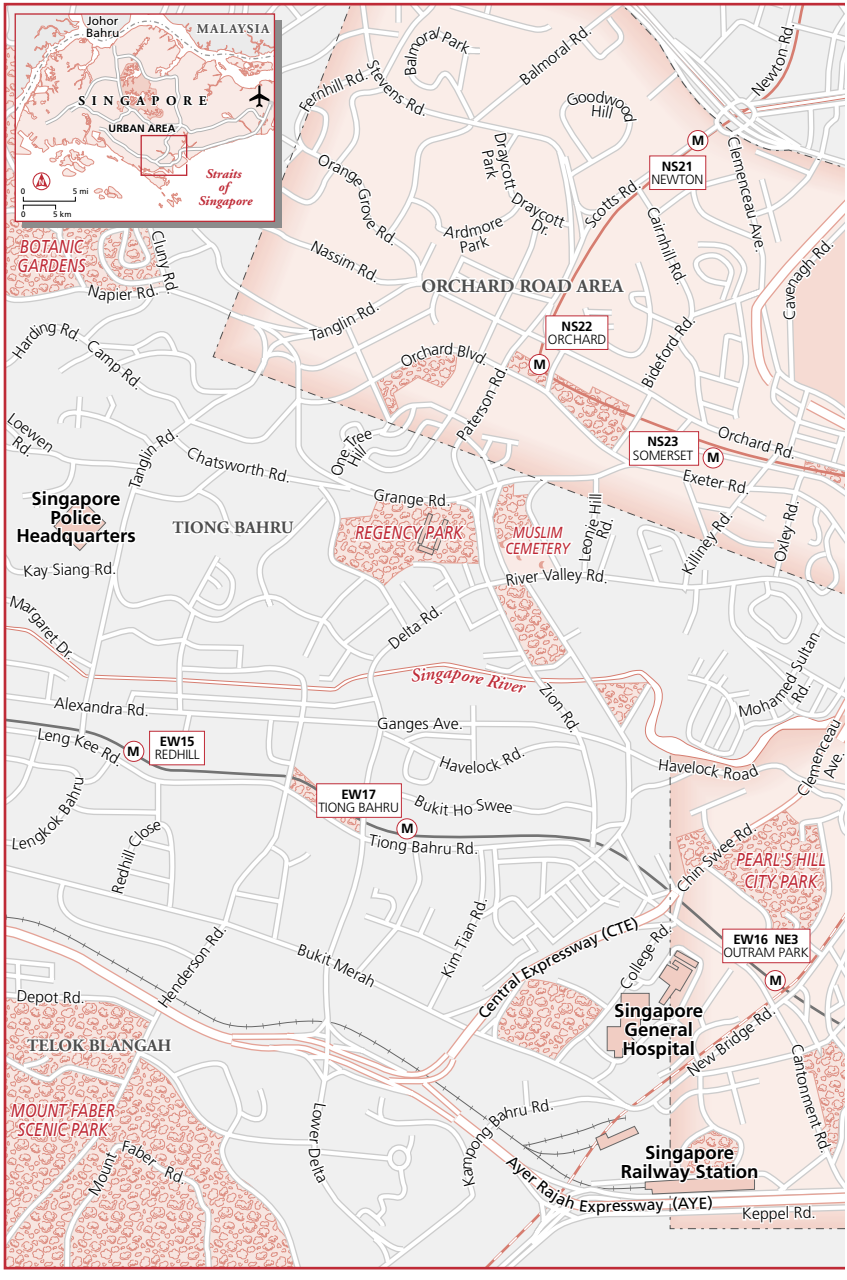
Say goodbye to Singapore, and prepare for your return flight home.

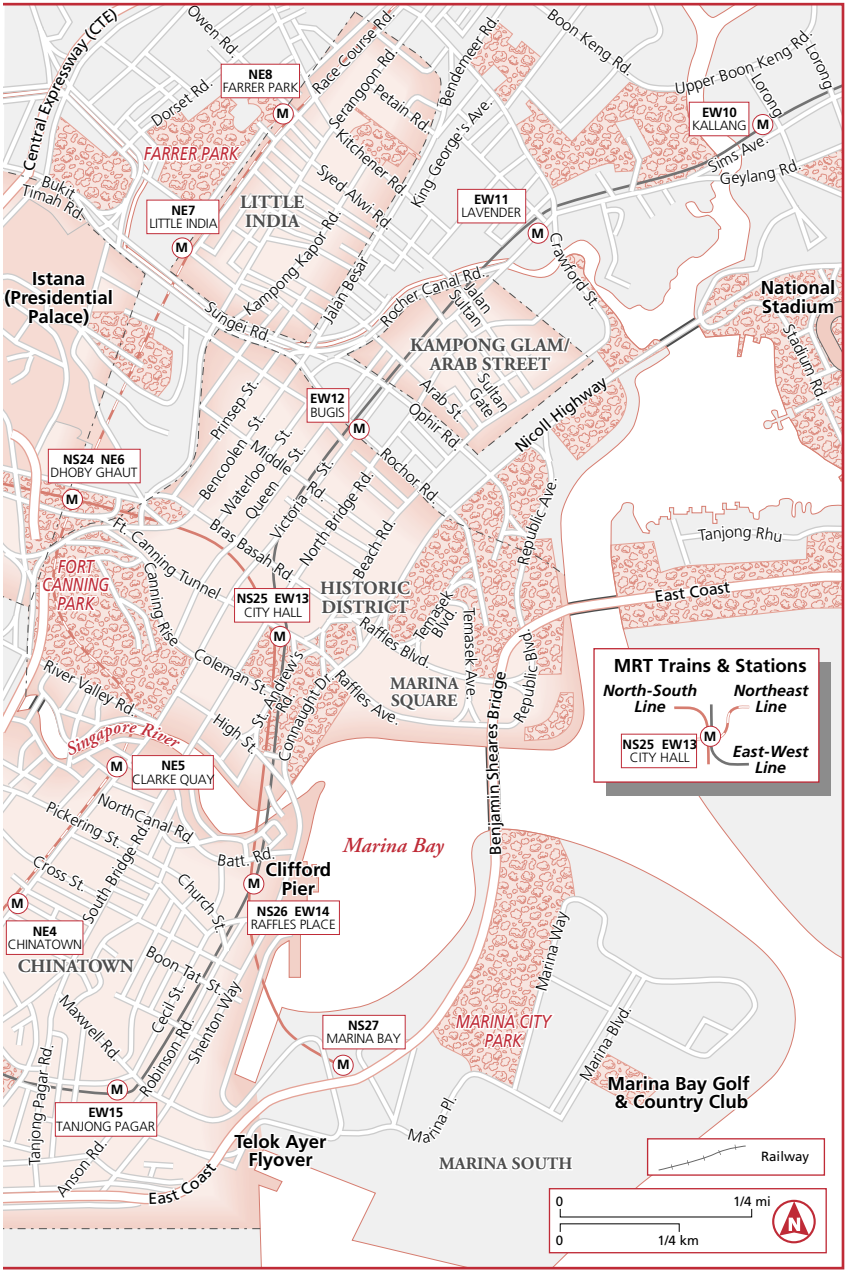
3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO SINGAPORE

VISITOR INFORMATION

The long arm of the **Singapore Tourism Board (STB)** reaches many overseas audiences through its branch offices, which will gladly provide brochures and booklets to help you plan your trip. Check out its website at **www.visitsingapore.com**.

Urban Singapore Neighborhoods




Central Expressway (CTE)
Owen Rd.
Race Course Rd.
Boon Keng Rd.
Upper Boon Keng Rd.
Lorong
Dorset Rd.
NE8
FARRER PARK
Serangoon Rd.
Petain Rd.
Bendemeer Rd.
King George's Ave.
EW10
KALLANG
Sims Ave.
Geylang Rd.
FARRER PARK
Bukit Timah Rd.
Kitchener Rd.
Syed Alwi Rd.
NE7
LITTLE INDIA
LITTLE INDIA
EW11
LAVENDER
Crawford St.
Istana (Presidential Palace)
Kampong Kapor Rd.
Jalan Besar
Rochor Canal Rd.
Jalan Sultan
National Stadium
Stadium Rd.
Sungei Rd.
KAMPONG GLAM/ ARAB STREET
Arab St.
Sultan Gate
Prinsep St.
EW12
BUGIS
Ophir Rd.
Nicoll Highway
Bencoolen St.
Middle St.
Waterloo St.
Queen St.
Victoria St.
Rochor Rd.
NS24 NE6
DHOBY GHAUT
North Bridge Rd.
Beach Rd.
Republic Ave.
Tanjong Rhu
Bras Basah Rd.
Ft. Canning Tunnel
Ft. Canning Rise
FORT CANNING PARK
NS25 EW13
CITY HALL
HISTORIC DISTRICT
Temasek Blvd.
Temasek Ave.
East Coast
Raffles Blvd.
Coleman St.
St. Andrew's Rd.
Connaught Dr.
Raffles Ave.
MARINA SQUARE
Republic Blvd.
River Valley Rd.
Singapore River
High St.
NE5
CLARKE QUAY
North Canal Rd.
Pickering St.
South Bridge Rd.
Batt. Rd.
Marina Bay
Benjamin Sheares Bridge
Cross St.
Clifford Pier
Church St.
NS26 EW14
RAFFLES PLACE
NE4
CHINATOWN
CHINATOWN
Boon Tat St.
Cecil St.
Maxwell Rd.
Robinson Rd.
Sheriton Way
Marina Way
NS27
MARINA BAY
MARINA CITY PARK
Marina Blvd.
Marina Bay Golf & Country Club
Tanjong Pagar Rd.
EW15
TANJONG PAGAR
Marina Pl.
Telok Ayer Flyover
MARINA SOUTH
Anson Rd.
East Coast
MRT Trains & Stations
North-South Line
Northeast Line
NS25 EW13
CITY HALL
East-West Line
Railway
0
1/4 mi
0
1/4 km
N

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

To enter Singapore, you must have a passport valid for at least 6 months from your date of entry. Visitors from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom are not required to obtain a visa prior to arrival. A Social Visit Pass (with combined social and business status) good for up to 30 days (up to 90 days for U.S. visitors) will be awarded upon entry for travelers arriving by plane, or for 14 days if your trip is by ship or overland from Malaysia or Indonesia. Immigrations officers are not required to grant you the maximum amount of days allotted, but rather have the discretion to grant you as many days as they feel you need.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

There's no restriction on the amount of currency you can bring into Singapore. For those age 19 and over who have arrived from countries other than Malaysia and have spent more than 48 hours outside Singapore, allowable duty-free concessions are 1 liter of spirits; 1 liter of wine; and 1 liter of either port, sherry, or beer, all of which must be intended for personal consumption only. There are no duty-free concessions on cigarettes or other tobacco items. If you exceed the duty-free limitations, you can bring your excess items in upon payment of goods and services tax (GST) and Customs duty.

PROHIBITED ITEMS It is important to note that Singapore has some very unique prohibitions on the import of certain items—any type of printed or recorded pornography; pirated movies, music, or software; and toy or decorative guns, knives, or swords are prohibited. A detailed rundown of prohibited items can be found at the Ministry of Home Affairs website, **www.mha.gov.sg**.

SINGAPORE'S DRUG POLICY Importing, selling, or using illegal narcotics is absolutely forbidden. Punishments are severe, up to and including the death penalty (automatic for morphine quantities exceeding 30g, heroin exceeding 15g, cocaine 30g, marijuana 500g, hashish 200g, opium 1.2kg, or methamphetamines 250g). If you're carrying smaller amounts (anything above: morphine 3g, heroin 2g, cocaine 3g, marijuana 15g, hashish 10g, opium 100g, or methamphetamines 25g), you'll still be considered to have intent to traffic and may face the death penalty if you can't prove otherwise. If you're crazy enough to try to bring these things into the country and are caught, no measure of appeal to your home consulate will grant you any special attention.

MONEY

The local currency unit is the **Singapore dollar (S$),** commonly referred to as the "Sing dollar." Notes vary in size and color, and are issued in denominations of S$2, $5, $10, $50, $100, $500, and $1,000. S$1 bills exist but are rare. Coins are issued in denominations of S1¢, 5¢, 10¢, 20¢, 50¢, and the fat, gold-colored S$1. Singapore has an interchangeability agreement with Brunei Darussalam, so don't be alarmed if you receive Brunei currency with your change, as it's legal tender. The exchange rate used throughout this chapter is **S$1.49 = $1.**

ATMS It's not an absolute necessity to buy Singapore dollars before your trip, since you can find ATMs at Changi International Airport's Terminals 1 and 2 as you exit the baggage-claim area.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE Many banks operate foreign exchange kiosks in all terminals of Changi International Airport; some are open 24 hours. In town, it's best to exchange currency at a local authorized money changer, found in most shopping malls

throughout the city. They'll give you the best rate. You'll lose money with the high rates at banks, hotels, and shops.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS You can exchange traveler's checks at any local authorized money changer in town.

CREDIT CARDS American Express, Visa, MasterCard, Diners Club, and JCB (Japan Credit Bureau) are accepted at virtually all major hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, and shopping centers. Even taxis accept payment by credit card. Smaller food and retail merchants generally don't accept plastic. Be advised, if you're trying to negotiate a discount with a vendor, you will always get a better price with good old-fashioned cash. Some retailers will insist on adding a credit card "service charge" to your bill. While it is true that the credit card companies charge the retailers a small fee each time a customer uses a card, it is a cost the retailers are supposed to bear themselves.

WHEN TO GO

A steady supply of business travelers keep occupancy rates high year-round; however, some hotels report that business travel gets sluggish during the months of July and August. This is probably your best time to negotiate a favorable rate. Peak season for travel falls between December and June, with "superpeak" beginning in mid-December and lasting through the Chinese Lunar New Year, which falls in January or February, depending on the moon's cycle. During this season, Asian travel routes are booked solid and hotels are maxed out. Good deals are rare, since most of Asia takes annual leave at this time.

CLIMATE Singapore lies between two monsoon winds that blow from north Asia half of the year and the Indian Ocean during the other half, bringing changes in weather patterns with them and varying rainfall greatly. The Northeast Monsoon arrives at the beginning of November and stays until mid-March; temperatures are slightly cooler, relatively speaking, than at other times of the year. The heaviest rainfall occurs between November and January, with daily showers that sometimes last for long periods of time; at other times, it comes down in short heavy gusts and goes away quickly. Wind speeds are rarely anything more than light. The Southwest Monsoon falls between June and September. Temperatures are much higher and, interestingly, it's during this time of year that Singapore gets the *least* rain (with the very least reported in July).

By and large, year-round temperatures remain uniform, with a daily average of 81°F (27°C), afternoon temperatures reaching as high as 87°F (31°C), and an average sunrise temperature as low as 75°F (24°C). Relative humidity often exceeds 90% at night and in the early morning. Even on a "dry" afternoon, don't expect it to drop much below 60%. (The daily average is 84% relative humidity.)

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS There are 11 official public holidays: **New Year's Day** (Jan 1); **Chinese New Year** or **Lunar New Year** (2 days in Jan or Feb); **Good Friday** (Fri before Easter Sun); **Labour Day** (May 1); **Vesak Day** (May or June); **National Day** (Aug 9); **Hari Raya Puasa** (Oct); **Deepavali** (Oct or Nov); **Hari Raya Haji** (Dec or Jan); and **Christmas** (Dec 25). On these days, expect government offices, banks, and some shops to be closed.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS Food is clean virtually everywhere, tap water is potable, restaurants and food vendors are regulated by the government, and many other airborne, bug-borne, and bite-borne what-have-yous have been eradicated.

Singapore doesn't require that you have any vaccinations to enter the country, but does recommend immunization against diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis A and B, and typhoid for anyone traveling to Southeast Asia in general. If you're particularly worried, follow this advice; if not, don't worry about it. See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 441) for information on the major health issues that affect travelers to Southeast Asia.

SAFETY CONCERNS You'll be fairly safe out during the wee hours in most parts of the city, and even a single woman alone has little to worry about. Occasionally, groups of young men may catcall, but mostly those groups are not hanging out in the more cosmopolitan areas. You can always get home safely in a taxi, which fortunately isn't too hard to find even late at night, with one exception: When Boat Quay clubs close, there's usually a mob of revelers scrambling for cabs. (Note that after midnight, a 50% surcharge is added to the fare.)

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Singapore's award-winning Changi International Airport is a major transportation hub for many of the world's largest passenger airlines, so flights from all corners of the globe are convenient.

The best deals are offered through Asian carriers. Compare fares at Japan Airlines (www.jal.co.jp), Korean Air (www.koreanair.com), Cathay Pacific Airways (www.cathaypacific.com), Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com), and Thai Airways International (www.thaiair.com).

Singapore's national carrier, **Singapore Airlines** (✆ **800/742-3333** in the U.S. and Canada, 0844/800-2380 in the U.K., 131011 in Australia, 0800/808-909 in New Zealand, or 65/6223-8888 in Singapore; www.singaporeair.com), is arguably one of the finest airlines in the world, with reliable service that is second to none. It's the most luxurious way to fly to Singapore, but sometimes the most expensive as well.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT Most visitors to Singapore will land at Changi International Airport, which is located toward the far eastern corner of the island. Compared to other international airports, Changi is a dream come true, providing clean and efficient facilities. Expect to find in-transit accommodations, restaurants, duty-free shops, money changers, ATMs, car-rental desks, accommodations assistance, and tourist information all marked in English with clear signs. Three terminals are connected by a Skytrain system. When you arrive, keep your eyes peeled for the many Singapore Tourism Board brochures that are so handily displayed throughout each terminal.

The city is easily accessible by public transportation. A taxi trip to the city center will cost around S$22 to S$25 ($15–$17/£9.90–£11), which is the metered fare plus an airport surcharge, usually S$3 to S$5 ($2–$3.40/£1.40–£2.30) depending on the time of pickup. It takes around 30 minutes to reach the city.

If you've got a lot of people and luggage, **CityCab** offers a six-seater maxicab to anywhere in the city for a flat rate of S$35 ($24/£16). You can inquire at the taxi queue or call ✆ **65/6542-8297.**

There's an **airport shuttle,** a coach that traverses between the airport and all major hotels. Booking counters at all three terminals are open daily from 6am to midnight. When you book your trip into town, you can also make an advanced reservation for your departure. Pay S$9 ($6/£4.10) for adults or S$6 ($4/£2.70) for children at Terminal 1 ✆ **65/6543-1985;** Terminal 2 ✆ **65/6546-1646;** Terminal 3 ✆ **65/6241-3818.**

The **MRT,** Singapore's subway system, operates to the airport, linking you with the city and areas beyond. STB will tell you the trip takes 30 minutes, but really, give yourself

at least an hour, because you'll need time to wait for the train to arrive, then you'll have to transfer trains at Tanah Merah station, and if you're arriving in Terminal 1, you'll need to hop on yet another train—a shuttle between terminals. After you get to your station in town, you'll still have to find your way, with your luggage, to your hotel. It's a pain in the neck, but it only costs about S$2.70 ($1.80/£1.20) to town. Trains operate roughly from 6am to midnight daily.

A couple of **buses** run from the airport into the city as well. SBS bus no. 36 is the best, with an express route to the Historic District and along Orchard Road. Pick up the bus in the basement of any terminal. The trip will take over an hour, and you'll need to get exact change before you board. A trip to town will be roughly S$2 ($1.30/90p).

For arrival and departure information, you can call **Changi International Airport** at ✆ **65/6542-4422.**

BY TRAIN

While most visitors to Singapore will arrive by air, some will come via train from Malaysia. The Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) operates a rail system that connects Singapore all the way up the Malay peninsula, with stops in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and even connections to service in Thailand to Bangkok. Train passengers will stop for immigration at the checkpoint at Woodlands, just across the strait from Malaysia, but will not alight until they reach the **Singapore Railway Station** on Keppel Road (✆ **65/6222-5165**), not far from Singapore's downtown financial district Shenton Way. Taxis to most major hotels will cost under S$10 ($6.70/£4.50).

For train information from Kuala Lumpur, call **KL Sentral** railway station at ✆ **603/2267-1200.** In Bangkok, call the **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** at ✆ **622/223-7010.**

BY BUS

Buses from Malaysia will drop off passengers at any number of points around the city, depending on the bus operator—there is no proper inbound bus station. For bus service from major Malaysian cities, refer to bus listings in each section. Operators will be able to tell you where you will be dropped off.

GETTING AROUND

The many inexpensive mass transit options make getting around Singapore pretty easy. Of course, taxis always simplify the ground-transportation dilemma. They're also very affordable and, by and large, drivers are helpful and honest if not downright personable. The **Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) subway service** has lines that cover the main areas of the city and out to the farther parts of the island. Buses present more of a challenge because there are so many routes snaking all over the island, but they're a great way to see the country while getting where you want to go.

Of course, if you're just strolling around the urban limits, many of the sights within the various neighborhoods are within walking distance, but walking between the different neighborhoods can be a hike, especially in the heat. The STB Visitors' Centres carry a variety of free city maps and walking-tour maps of individual neighborhoods to help you find your way around.

Stored-value EZ-Link fare cards can be used on both the subway and buses, and can be purchased at TransitLink offices in MRT stations. These save you the bother of trying to dig up exact change for bus meters. The card does carry a S$5 ($3.40/£2.30) initial cost and a S$3 ($2/£1.40) deposit—for a S$15 ($10/£6.80) initial investment, you'll get S$7 ($4.70/£3.20) worth of travel credit.

A better deal is the **Singapore Tourist Pass,** a card that allows unlimited travel on MRT trains and public buses for 1, 2, or 3 days. The cost is S$8 ($5.40/£3.60) per day, with a refundable S$10 ($6.70/£4.50) deposit. Passes can be purchased at the following MRT stations: Changi Airport, Orchard, Chinatown, City Hall, Raffles Place, Harbourfront, and Bugis, and at the STB Visitors' Centres at Changi Airport and Orchard Road.

I recommend purchasing the latest edition of the *TransitLink Guide* for about S$2 ($1.30/90p) at the TransitLink office where you buy your card. This tiny book details both MRT and bus routes with maps of each MRT station's surroundings, and it indicates connections between buses and MRT stations. It also lists fares for each trip.

BY TAXI Taxis are by far the most convenient way to get around Singapore. Fares are cheap, cars are clean, and drivers speak English. Taxi queues can be found at every hotel, shopping mall, and public building; otherwise you can flag one down from the side of the road. Most destinations in the main parts of the island can be reached fairly inexpensively, while trips to the outlying attractions can cost from S$10 to S$15 ($6.70–$10/£4.50–£6.80) one-way. However, I caution against becoming too dependent on them. During the morning and evening rush you can wait a maddeningly long time in the line, and sometimes if you're at a destination outside the main city area, they're few and far between. If it's raining, you might as well stay put; you'll never get a cab.

If you do find yourself stranded, there are a few things you can do. If you're at an attraction or a restaurant, you can ask the cashier or help desk to call a taxi company and book a cab for you. If you're near a phone, you can make your own booking: **CityCab** (✆ **65/6552-2222**), **Comfort** (✆ **65/6552-1111**), and **TIBS** (✆ **65/6555-8888**). There's an extra charge for the booking, anywhere between S$2.50 and S$3.50 ($1.70–$2.30/£1.10–£1.60).

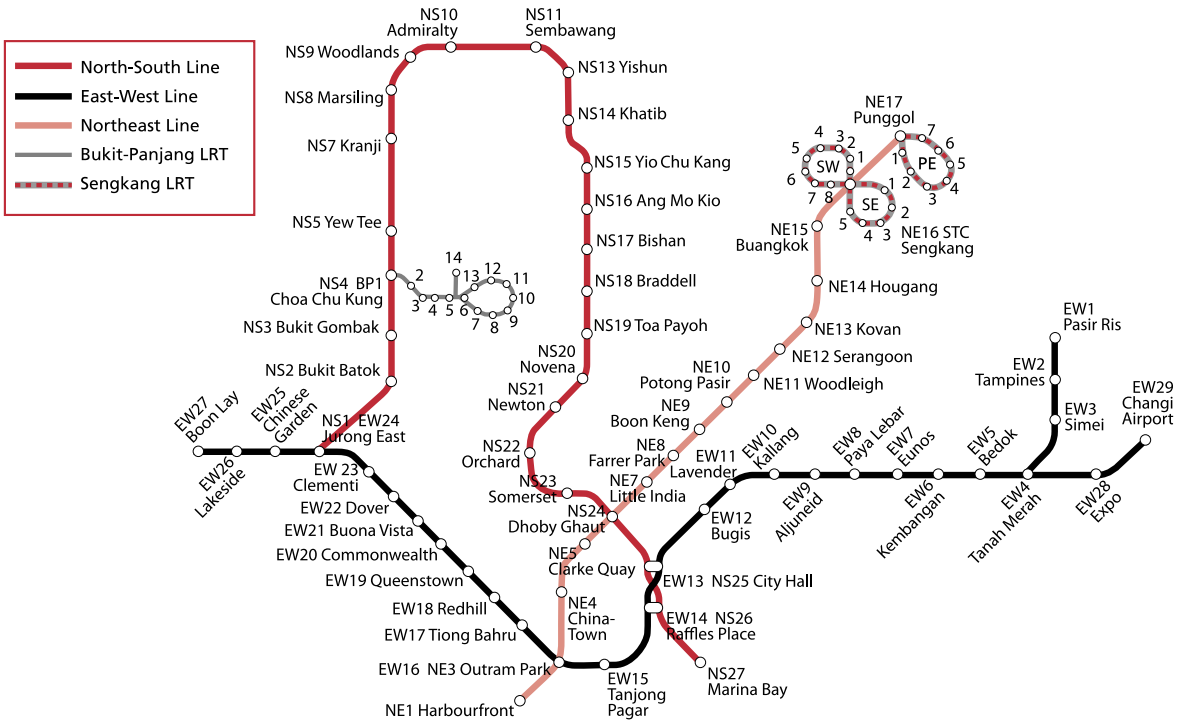
Taxis charge the metered fare, which is from S$2.80 to S$3 ($1.90–$2/£1.30–£1.40) for the first kilometer (½ mile) and S20¢ (10¢/5p) for each additional 300 to 400m (985–1,310 ft.) or 45 seconds of waiting. Extra fares are levied on top of the metered fare depending on where you're going and when you go. At times, figuring your fare seems more like a riddle. Here's a summary:

Trips during peak hours: Between the hours of 7 and 9:30am Monday to Friday, and 5 and 8pm Monday to Saturday, meters tack on an additional 35%. If you're traveling within the Central Business District (CBD) from 5pm 'til midnight Monday through Saturday, you also pay an additional S$3 ($2/£1.40) surcharge. (The boundaries of the CBD are basically Orchard Rd., the Historic District, Chinatown, and Shenton Way.)

Additional charges rack up each time you travel through an Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) scheme underpass. On the Central Expressway (CTE), Pan-Island Expressway (PIE), and selected thoroughfares in the CBD, charges from S50¢ to S$3 (30¢–$2/£1.30–£1.40) are calculated by an electronic box on the driver's dashboard. The driver will add this amount to your fare.

Other charges: From midnight to 6am, add 50% to your fare. From 6pm on the eve of a public holiday to midnight the following day, you pay an additional S$1 (70¢/50p). From Changi Airport add S$5 ($3.40/£2.30) if you're traveling Friday, Saturday, or Sunday between 5pm and midnight. Other times, it's S$3 ($2/£1.40). And for credit card payments (yes, they take plastic) add 10%.

BY MASS RAPID TRANSIT (MRT) The MRT is Singapore's subway system. It's cool, clean, safe, and reliable, providing service around the central parts of the city, extending into the suburbs around the island. There are stops along Orchard Road into the Historic District, to Chinatown and Little India—chances are there will be a stop close to your hotel.


North-South Line
East-West Line
Northeast Line
Bukit-Panjang LRT
Sengkang LRT
NS10 Admiralty
NS11 Sembawang
NS9 Woodlands
NS13 Yishun
NS8 Marsiling
NS14 Khatib
NS7 Kranji
NS15 Yio Chu Kang
NS16 Ang Mo Kio
NS5 Yew Tee
NS17 Bishan
NS4 BP1 Choa Chu Kung
NS18 Braddell
NS3 Bukit Gombak
NS19 Toa Payoh
NS20 Novena
NS2 Bukit Batok
NS21 Newton
EW27 Boon Lay
EW25 Chinese Garden
NS1 EW24 Jurong East
NS22 Orchard
EW26 Lakeside
EW 23 Clementi
NS23 Somerset
EW22 Dover
NS24 Dhoby Ghaut
EW21 Buona Vista
NE5 Clarke Quay
EW20 Commonwealth
EW19 Queenstown
NE4 China-Town
EW18 Redhill
EW17 Tiong Bahru
EW16 NE3 Outram Park
EW15 Tanjong Pagar
NE1 Harbourfront
EW13 NS25 City Hall
EW14 NS26 Raffles Place
NS27 Marina Bay
NE17 Punggol
SW
PE
SE
NE15 Buangkok
NE16 STC Sengkang
NE14 Hougang
NE13 Kovan
NE12 Serangoon
NE10 Potong Pasir
NE11 Woodleigh
NE9 Boon Keng
NE8 Farrer Park
NE7 Little India
EW11 Lavender
EW10 Kallang
EW12 Bugis
EW9 Aljunied
EW8 Paya Lebar
EW7 Eunos
EW6 Kembangan
EW5 Bedok
EW4 Tanah Merah
EW1 Pasir Ris
EW2 Tampines
EW3 Simei
EW28 Expo
EW29 Changi Airport

Fares range from S70¢ to S$2 (50¢–$1.30/30p–90p), depending on which stations you travel between. System charts are prominently displayed in all MRT stations to help you find your appropriate fare, which you pay with an EZ-Link fare card. Single-fare cards can be purchased at vending machines inside MRT stations. See above for information on stored-fare cards for multiple trips. (***One caution:*** A fare card cannot be used by two people for the same trip; each must have his own.)

MRT operating hours vary between lines and stops, with the earliest train beginning service daily at 5:15am and the last train ending at 12:47am. For more information, call the **TransitLink Hot Line** at ✆ **1800-225-5663** (daily 24 hr.).

BY BUS Singapore's bus system comprises an extensive web of routes that reach virtually everywhere on the island. Use an EZ-Link stored value card to pay for your trips, and a *TransitLink Guide* to find your way around (see above for more details). All buses have a gray machine with a sensor pad located close to the driver. Tap your EZ-Link card when you board and alight, and the fare will be automatically deducted. It'll be anywhere between S80¢ and S$1.80 (50¢–$1.20/40p–80p). If you're paying cash, be sure to have exact change; place the coins in the red box by the driver and announce your fare to him. He'll issue a ticket, which will pop out of a slot on one of the TransitLink machines behind him. If you're not sure how much your fare should be, the driver can assist.

For more information, contact either of the two operating bus lines during standard business hours: **Singapore Bus Service** (**SBS;** ✆ **1800-287-2727**) or the **Trans-Island Bus Service** (**TIBS;** ✆ **1800-482-5433**).

BY TROLLEY For sightseeing trips around town, your best bet is the **SIA Hop-on bus.** Plying between Suntec City, the Historic District, the Singapore River, Chinatown, Orchard Road and the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Little India, and Sentosa, the Hop-on comes every 30 minutes between the hours of 9am and 10pm daily. Unlimited rides for 1 day cost S$12 ($8/£5.40) adults and S$6 ($4/£2.70) children. If you flew Singapore Airlines to get here, you only have to pay S$6 ($4/£2.70) adults and S$3 ($2/£1.40) children if you flash your boarding pass. Buy your tickets from the bus driver when you board. For info, call **SH Tours** ✆ **65/6734-9923.**

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Singapore:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Singapore's country code **(65),** and then the eight-digit number (for example, 011 65 0000-0000).
- **To place a direct international call from Singapore:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Laos, 856; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

BY CAR Visitors to Singapore rarely rent cars for sightseeing, because it's just not convenient. Local transportation is excellent and affordable, you don't have to adjust to local driving rules and habits, plus there's no need to worry about where to park. Still, if you must, contact **Avis** at ✆ **800/373-1668;** they operate counters in all three Changi Airport terminals daily 7am to 11pm.

Fast Facts Singapore

American Express The American Express office is at 300 Beach Rd., #18-01 The Concourse (✆ **65/6880-1333**). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm and Saturday from 9am to 1pm. There's a more convenient kiosk that handles traveler's checks and simple card transactions (including emergency check guarantee) on Orchard Road just outside the Marriott Hotel at Tangs (✆ **65/6735-2069**); open daily from 9am to 9pm. An additional foreign exchange office is at Changi International Airport, Terminal 2 (✆ **65/6546-5456**), open from noon to midnight daily.

Business Hours Shopping centers are open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm (until 10pm on some public holidays). Banks are open from 9:30am to 3pm Monday through Friday and from 9 to 11am on Saturday. Restaurants open at lunchtime from around 11am to 2:30pm; for dinner, they reopen around 6pm and take the last order sometime around 10pm. Government offices are open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm and Saturday from 9am to 1pm. Post offices conduct business Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm and Saturday from 8:30am to 1pm.

Drugstores **Guardian Pharmacies** fills prescriptions (from a licensed physician within Singapore) with name-brand drugs. Convenient locations include #B105 Centrepoint Shopping Centre (✆ **65/6737-4835**), Changi International Airport, Terminal 2 (✆ **65/6545-4233**), #02139 Marina Sq. (✆ **65/6333-9565**), and #B104 Raffles Place MRT station (✆ **65/6535-2762**).

Electricity Standard electrical current is 220 volts AC (50 cycles). Local outlets are made for plugs with three square prongs. Ask your concierge to see if your hotel has converters and plug adapters for guests' use. If you're using sensitive equipment, do not trust cheap voltage transformers. Nowadays, a lot of electrical equipment—including laptop computers—comes with built-in converters, so you can follow the manufacturer's directions for changing them over. FYI, video-cassettes taped on different voltage currents are recorded on machines with different record and playback cycles. Prerecorded videotapes are not interchangeable between currents unless you have special equipment that can play either kind.

Embassies & Consulates **U.S.:** 27 Napier Rd. (✆ **65/6476-9100;** http://singapore.usembassy.gov). **Canada:** 80 Anson Rd. (✆ **65/6325-3240;** www.singapore.gc.ca). **Australia:** 391A Orchard Rd., Ngee Ann City Tower A, #15-06 (✆ **65/6836-4100;** www.singapore.embassy.gov.au). **New Zealand:** 391A Orchard Rd., Ngee Ann City Tower A, #15-06 (✆ **65/6235-9966;** www.nzembassy.com/singapore). **U.K.:** Tanglin Road (✆ **65/6473-9333;** www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/singapore).

Emergencies For police, dial ✆ **999.** For medical or fire emergencies, dial ✆ **995.**

Hospitals If you require hospitalization, the centrally located **Mount Elizabeth Hospital** is near Orchard Road at 3 Mount Elizabeth (✆ **65/6737-2666**); for accidents and emergencies, call ✆ **65/6731-2218.** You can also try **Singapore General Hospital,** Outram Road (✆ **65/6222-3322**); for accidents and emergencies, call ✆ **65/6321-4311.**

Internet Access Internet cafes are becoming common throughout the city, with usage costs about S$5 ($3.35/£2.30) per hour. (Hotel businesses charge a much higher rate.) Almost every shopping mall has one, especially along Orchard Road, and there are cybercafes in both terminals at Changi International Airport. In the Historic District, there are a few in Stamford House, just across from City Hall MRT station. Check out **Chills Café,** #01-07 Stamford House, 39 Stamford Rd. (✆ **65/6883-1016**), open daily from 9am to midnight.

Language Singapore's four official languages are Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil, and English. Malay is the national language, while English is the language for government operations, law, and major financial transactions. See "Language," p. 436, for more information.

Liquor Laws The legal age for alcohol purchase and consumption is 18—but clubs rarely check foreigners. Bars and pubs usually open in the afternoon and stay open until 1am on weeknights or 2am on Friday and Saturday. Clubs and discos open around 8pm and stay open until 2am on weekdays or 3am on Friday and Saturday. Unless you come from New York, London, or Tokyo, you'll find alcohol very expensive here because of heavy "sin taxes."

Lost & Found Be sure to tell all of your credit card companies the minute you discover your wallet has been lost or stolen. File a report at the nearest police precinct; your credit card company or insurer may require a police report number or record of the loss. Most credit card companies have an emergency toll-free number to call if your card is lost or stolen; they may be able to wire you a cash advance immediately or deliver an emergency credit card in a day or two. Within Singapore, use the following toll-free hot lines: **American Express** (✆ **800/737-8188**), **MasterCard** (✆ **800/110-0113**), **Visa** (✆ **800/110-0344**).

If you need emergency cash over the weekend when all banks and American Express offices are closed, you can have money wired to you via **Western Union** at most Sing Post branches.

Mail Most hotels have mail service at the front desk. Singapore Post has centrally located offices at #0415 Ngee Ann City/Takashimaya Shopping Centre (✆ **65/6738-6899**); Chinatown Point, 133 New Bridge Rd. #0242/43/44 (✆ **65/6538-7899**); Change Alley, 16 Collyer Quay #0202 Hitachi Tower (✆ **65/6538-6899**); and 231 Bain St. #0103 Bras Basah Complex (✆ **65/6339-8899**). There are also five branches at Changi International Airport.

The going rate for airmail letters to North America and Europe is S$1 (65¢/45p) for 20 grams plus S35¢ (20¢/15p) for each additional 10 grams. For airmail service to Australia and New Zealand, the rate is S70¢ (45¢/30p) for 20 grams plus S30¢ (20¢/15p) for each additional 10 grams. Postcards and aerogrammes to all destinations are S50¢ (30¢/20p).

Newspapers & Magazines Local English newspapers available are the *International Herald Tribune,* the *Business Times,* the *Straits Times, Today,* and *USA Today International.* Following an article criticizing the Singapore government, the *Wall Street Journal Asia* was banned from wide distribution in Singapore. Most of the major hotels carry it, though, so ask around. *I-S Magazine* is a good resource for nightlife happenings. The STB visitor centers carry a few free publications for travelers, including *Where Singapore, This Week Singapore,* and *Singapore Business Visitor.* Major bookstores and news shops sell a wide variety of international magazines.

Police Given the strict reputation of law enforcement in Singapore, you can bet the officers here don't have the greatest sense of humor. If you find yourself being questioned about anything, big or small, be dead serious and most respectful. For emergencies, call ✆ **999.** If you need to call police headquarters, dial ✆ **1800-255-0000.**

If you are arrested, you have the right to legal counsel, but only when the police decide you can exercise that right. Bottom line: Don't get arrested.

Smoking It's against the law to smoke in public buses, elevators, theaters, cinemas, air-conditioned restaurants, shopping centers, government offices, and taxi queues.

Taxes Many hotels and restaurants will advertise rates followed by "++." The first + is the goods and services tax (GST), which is levied at 7% of the purchase. The second + is 10% gratuity charge (a 1% tax levied by the STB on all tourism-related activities). See "Shopping," later in this chapter, for information on the GST Global Refund Scheme, which lets you recover the GST for purchases of goods over S$100 ($192/£105) in value.

Telephones Public telephones can be found on the street or back near the toilets in shopping malls, public buildings, or hotel lobbies. Because most Singaporeans now carry cellphones, public phones aren't always properly maintained. Local calls cost S10¢ (5¢/5p) for 3 minutes at coin- and card-operated phones. International calls can be made only from public phones designated specifically for this purpose; these will accept either a phone card or credit card. Phone cards for local and international calls can be purchased at Singapore Post branches, 7-Eleven convenience stores, or money changers—make sure you specify local or international card when you make your purchase.

For **directory assistance,** dial ✆ **100** if you're looking for a number inside Singapore; dial ✆ **104** for numbers to all other countries, as well as for operator assistance in making a call. See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 446, for details on how to make calls.

Note: Numbers beginning with **1800** within Singapore are toll-free, but calling a 1-800 number in the U.S. from Singapore is not toll-free. In fact, it costs the same as an overseas call.

Time Zone Singapore is 8 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). International time differences will change during daylight saving or summer time. Basic time differences are: New York –13, Los Angeles –16, London –8, Brisbane +3, Melbourne +2, Sydney +3, and Auckland +4. For the current time within Singapore, call ✆ **1711.**

Tipping Tipping is discouraged in hotels, bars, and taxis. Basically, the deal here is not to tip. A gratuity is automatically added to guest checks, and there's no need to slip anyone an extra buck for carrying bags or such—it's not expected.

Toilets Clean public toilets can be found in all shopping malls, hotels, and public buildings. Smaller restaurants may not be up on their cleanliness, and beware the Asian-style squat toilet, which you see in the more "local" places. Carry plenty of tissues with you.

Water Tap water in Singapore is potable and passes World Health Organization standards.

4 WHERE TO STAY

Budget accommodations are not a high priority on the island. Between the business community's demand for luxury and the inflated Singaporean real estate market, rates tend to be high. Don't fret, though: There's a range of accommodations out there—you just have to know where to find them.

Think about what you'll be doing in Singapore—that way, you can choose a hotel that's close to the particular action that suits you. (On the other hand, since Singapore is a small place and public transportation is excellent, really nothing's ever too far away.) **Orchard Road** has the largest cluster of hotels in the city, right in the heart of Singaporean shopping mania. The **Historic District** hotels are near museums and sights, while those in **Marina Bay** center more around the business professionals who come to Singapore for Suntec City, the giant convention and exhibition center. **Chinatown** and **Tanjong Pagar** have some lovely boutique hotels in quaint back streets, while **Shenton Way** has a couple of high-rise places for the convenience of people visiting the downtown business district. Many hotels have free morning and evening shuttle buses to Orchard Road, Suntec City, and Shenton Way.

While budget hotels have very limited facilities and simpler decor, you can always expect a clean room. What's more, service can sometimes be more personal in smaller hotels, where the staff has fewer faces to recognize and is accustomed to helping guests with the sorts of things a business center or concierge would handle in a larger place. Par for the course, many of the guests in these places are backpackers, and mostly Western backpackers at that. However, you will see some regional visitors staying in these hotels. ***Note:*** The budget accommodations listed here are places decent enough for any standards. While cheaper digs are available, those rooms can be dreary and depressing, musty and old, or downright sleazy.

Unless you choose one of the extreme budget hotels, there are some standard features you can expect to find everywhere. Many hotels have courtesy shuttles to popular parts of town. Most places have adequate fitness-center facilities. Pools tend to be on the small side, and Jacuzzis are often placed in men's and women's locker rooms, making it impossible for couples to use them together. While tour desks are in some lobbies, car-rental desks are nonexistent.

A newer trend is the boutique hotel. Conceived as part of the Urban Restoration Authority's renewal plans, rows of old shophouses and historic buildings in ethnic areas

such as Chinatown and Tanjong Pagar have been restored and transformed into small, lovely accommodations. Places such as Albert Court Hotel and the Inn at Temple Street are beautiful examples of local flavor turned into quaint lodging. While these places can put you closer to the heart of Singapore, they do have their drawbacks—for one, the hotels and their rooms are small and, due to building codes and lack of space, they're unable to provide facilities such as pools, Jacuzzis, or fitness centers.

Many of the finest restaurants in Singapore are located in hotels, whether they're operated by the hotel directly or just inhabiting rented space. Some hotels can have up to five or six restaurants, each serving a different cuisine. Generally, you can expect these restaurants to be more expensive than places located outside hotels. In the hotel reviews below, distinguished restaurants have been noted.

RATES With room rates rising more than 20% each year and an average room now breaking the S$200 barrier for the first time, this can be a tough destination for travelers on a budget. As more and more hotels move away from the rack rate system of published room prices it can be difficult to compare value, so although some rack rates are included here, there are plenty of promotional rates on offer. If you've decided where you want to stay, make sure you call in advance and ask what special deals are available. Also check out hotel discount websites on the Internet (such as www.asiarooms.com), though they don't list every hotel. Places that have just completed renovation programs tend to offer good discounts and many business-orientated hotels have special rates for weekends and longer stays.

TAXES & SERVICE CHARGES Most rates do not include the so-called "++" taxes and charges: the 10% service charge and 7% goods and services tax (GST). Keep these in mind when figuring your budget. Some budget hotels will quote discount rates inclusive of all taxes, and Internet sites normally include taxes.

HISTORIC DISTRICT

Very Expensive

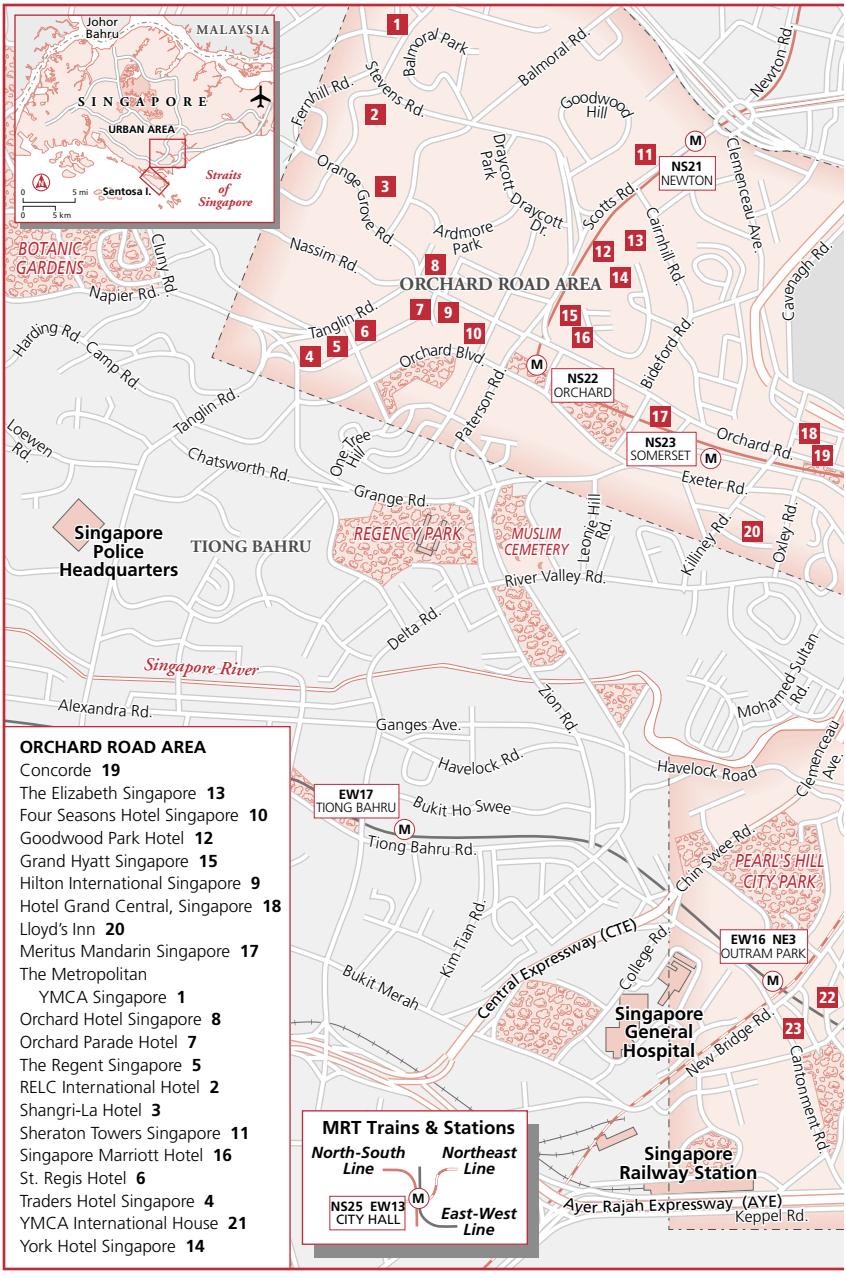
The Fairmont ★★★ The Fairmont is designed to make life easy for the weary traveler. Close to the sights of the Historic District, it's also directly above an MRT hub and next to the enormous Raffles City shopping center. Rooms in the North Tower have an attractive and contemporary Asian flavor, while South Tower rooms have polished wooden floors, Bose sound systems, and Heavenly Beds with 10 layers of goose feathers. Ask for a harbor view in the South Tower to enjoy the best views of the financial district skyscrapers overlooking Marina Bay. The Amrita Spa is Singapore's largest spa with

Tips Hotel Reservations—In Advance & on Arrival

The website **www.asiarooms.com** offers the best rates for Internet bookings, particularly for accommodations in the "Very Expensive" and "Expensive" categories; however, it doesn't have deals for every hotel property.

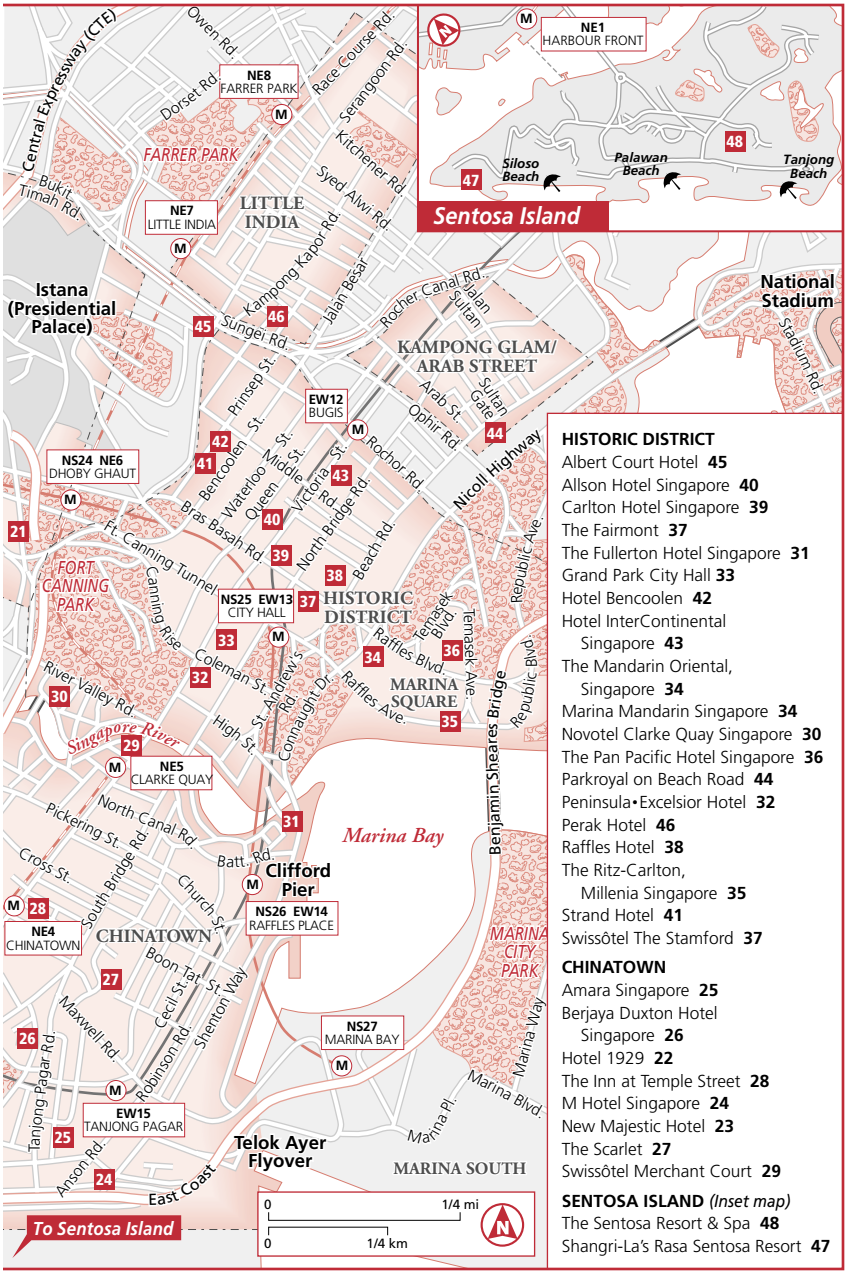
If you aren't able to book a room before your trip, don't worry: The **Singapore Hotel Association** operates desks in both Terminals 1 and 2 of Changi International Airport, with reservations services based upon room availability for many hotels. The desks are open daily from 7:30am to 11:30pm.

Where to Stay in Urban Singapore



ORCHARD ROAD AREA

Concorde **19**
The Elizabeth Singapore **13**
Four Seasons Hotel Singapore **10**
Goodwood Park Hotel **12**
Grand Hyatt Singapore **15**
Hilton International Singapore **9**
Hotel Grand Central, Singapore **18**
Lloyd's Inn **20**
Meritus Mandarin Singapore **17**
The Metropolitan YMCA Singapore **1**
Orchard Hotel Singapore **8**
Orchard Parade Hotel **7**
The Regent Singapore **5**
RELC International Hotel **2**
Shangri-La Hotel **3**
Sheraton Towers Singapore **11**
Singapore Marriott Hotel **16**
St. Regis Hotel **6**
Traders Hotel Singapore **4**
YMCA International House **21**
York Hotel Singapore **14**



HISTORIC DISTRICT
Albert Court Hotel **45**
Allson Hotel Singapore **40**
Carlton Hotel Singapore **39**
The Fairmont **37**
The Fullerton Hotel Singapore **31**
Grand Park City Hall **33**
Hotel Bencoolen **42**
Hotel InterContinental Singapore **43**
The Mandarin Oriental, Singapore **34**
Marina Mandarin Singapore **34**
Novotel Clarke Quay Singapore **30**
The Pan Pacific Hotel Singapore **36**
Parkroyal on Beach Road **44**
Peninsula•Excelsior Hotel **32**
Perak Hotel **46**
Raffles Hotel **38**
The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore **35**
Strand Hotel **41**
Swissôtel The Stamford **37**

CHINATOWN
Amara Singapore **25**
Berjaya Duxton Hotel Singapore **26**
Hotel 1929 **22**
The Inn at Temple Street **28**
M Hotel Singapore **24**
New Majestic Hotel **23**
The Scarlet **27**
Swissôtel Merchant Court **29**

SENTOSA ISLAND *(Inset map)*
The Sentosa Resort & Spa **48**
Shangri-La's Rasa Sentosa Resort **47**

plunge pools, a huge range of Asian and European treatments, and a state-of-the-art fitness center that's open around the clock. Business facilities are outstanding, with a dedicated executive floor with its own lounge, complimentary use of meeting rooms, in-room espresso machines, and a private gym.

2 Stamford Rd., Singapore 178882. ✆ **65/6339-7777.** Fax 65/6337-1554. www.fairmont.com/singapore. 769 units. S$484 ($320/£220) double; from S$1,177 ($790/£530) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 12 restaurants; martini bar, lobby lounge, and a live jazz venue; outdoor pool; spa w/gym, Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movie, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

The Fullerton Hotel Singapore ★★ The historic Fullerton, which rivals Raffles in luxury and architecture, is regularly voted one of Asia's top hotels. Superb views in almost every direction include the Singapore River and Historic District, the city skyline, and the harbor. Built in 1928 as the General Post Office, its location, immense size, and classical Doric columns are testament to its vital role in the colonial government. The restoration and hotel conversion has been done beautifully, with lofty, elegant public spaces and guest rooms cleverly arranged to fit the original structure. Rooms are oases of comfort, stylish and contemporary with flatscreen TVs, PlayStations, large desks, and Philippe Starck fittings in the enormous bathrooms. Facilities are excellent, too, with a state-of-the-art gym and spa and an infinity pool that overlooks the river. Standards of service are second to none. A range of restaurants offer fine dining, sophisticated bars, and a location that's perfect for business and pleasure.

1 Fullerton Sq., Singapore 049178. ✆ **800/44-UTELL** (88355) in the U.S. and Canada, 800/221-176 in Australia, 800/933-123 in New Zealand, or 65/6733-8388. Fax 65/6735-8388. www.fullertonhotel.com. 400 units. S$507 ($340/£230) double; S$900 ($600/£410) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Raffles Place MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; outdoor infinity pool w/view of the Singapore River; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; spa w/massage and beauty treatments; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movie, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

The Mandarin Oriental Singapore ★★★ The Mandarin Oriental is the most elegant of the Marina Bay atrium-style hotels, with its subdued lobby of dark polished marble, rich fabrics, and stunning orchid arrangements. Even the central elevator lobby is surrounded by softly trickling limpid pools. The king- and queen-size bedrooms have a sophisticated contemporary Asian look, beautiful silk prints, and upholstered wicker chairs. Oceanview rooms overlook the Singapore Flyer and the bay, though only suites have balconies with a seating area. The newly refurbished city-facing rooms have attractive modern oak partitions and marble bathrooms. The Mandarin Oriental's restaurants and bars are excellent, though expensive, and its hushed, exotic spa is impressive. Service is superb.

5 Raffles Ave., Marina Sq., Singapore 039797. ✆ **800/526-6566** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/123-693 in Australia, 800/2828-3838 in New Zealand and the U.K., or 65/6338-0066. Fax 65/6339-9537. www.mandarinoriental.com/singapore. 524 units. S$458 ($310/£210) double; from S$786 ($530/£350) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam; concierge; limousine service; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movie, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Raffles Hotel ★★ When you walk into Raffles you experience a palpable sense of event. Liveried Sikh doormen usher you through the ornate wrought-iron portico into a lobby that seems faithfully unaltered from the hotel's 1930s heyday. If price is no object, then Raffles will deliver a blend of luxury, history, and colonial ambience no other hotel can match. Only guests are allowed into the private inner lobby, or to stroll across the polished teak verandas overlooking tropical courtyards to suites decorated with a small elegant lounge, period furnishings, and a lovely four-poster bed. Although suites are on the small side, every detail is true to the hotel's heritage, making a stay here the ultimate in romance. Butlers provide customized service for each suite. There is a small landscaped rooftop pool, and a spa that can arrange individualized treatments with the utmost discretion. Residents also have the benefit of eight exceptional dining choices.

1 Beach Rd., Singapore 189673. ✆ **800/232-1886** in the U.S. and Canada, or 65/6337-1886. Fax 65/6339-7650. www.raffleshotel.com. 103 suites. From S$907 ($610/£410) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Next to City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 8 restaurants; 2 bars and a billiard room; small outdoor pool; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and spa; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; personal butler service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-room VCR, fax, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore ★★★ No one could accuse the Ritz-Carlton of looking like just another international hotel. Three hectares (7 acres) of landscaped grounds offer a sense of peace, despite its busy Marina Bay location. Inside the award-winning Kevin Roche's building, the lobby and public areas showcase extraordinary art: Hockney and Warhol brush shoulders with more than 4,000 works by international artists. You can't miss Dale Chihuly's vivid glass tendrils, which exude from the walls of the lounge and restaurant areas on either side of the lobby. Guest rooms are quiet and larger than most in Singapore, and each has stunning views of either the Kallang or Marina bays. Decor and furnishings are sumptuous and comfortable, with big wood-posted beds dressed in crisp white linens, lounges, and walk-in closets. Best of all are the huge octagonal picture windows placed next to the bathtub in every room.

7 Raffles Ave., Singapore 039799. ✆ **800/241-3333** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/241-33333 in Australia, 800/241-33333 in New Zealand, 800/234-000 in the U.K., or 65/6337-8888. Fax 65/6338-0001. www.ritzcarlton.com. 610 units. S$475 ($320/£210) double; from S$681 ($320/£210) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor pool and Jacuzzi; outdoor lighted tennis court; fitness center w/sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping mall adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

Expensive

Novotel Clarke Quay Singapore ★ This hotel towers over the Singapore River just next to Clarke Quay (a popular spot for nightlife, dining, and shopping) and is a stroll away from the Historic District. The rooms and pool area were refreshed in 2008. Guest rooms are a good size, some with space for four single beds. All have small balconies with good views of the river, the financial district, Fort Canning Park, or Chinatown, and even standard rooms have large bathrooms like those you typically see in more deluxe accommodations. Decor is Western contemporary in shades of brown, green, and tan, with small desks next to floor-to-ceiling picture windows. The main lobby is an elevator ride up from the ground level. A recently renovated adjacent shopping mall has groceries in the basement and a few handy shops.

177A River Valley Rd., Singapore 179031. ✆ **800/515-5679** in the U.S. and Canada, or 65/6338-3333. Fax 65/6339-2854. www.novotel.com. 398 units. S$325 ($220/£150) double; from S$470 ($310/£210) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Clarke Quay MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center; Jacuzzi; concierge; tour desk; limousine service; shuttle service; business center; shopping mall adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

The Pan Pacific Hotel Singapore ★★ A recent face-lift has given the Pan Pacific a new look. Public spaces are awash with color; the lobby has a checkerboard inlay reception counter, vibrant carpeting, and a lobby lounge with walls of lights that change colors. Guest rooms are large, with wood paneling in geometric panels, Asian-inspired fabrics, and large oval desktops. New entertainment centers allow you to hook up your laptop to the TV and iPod to the stereo. Hands down, Pan Pac has Singapore's best business center—a full floor designated to private offices, with full secretarial services, every piece of office equipment you'd need, plus meeting rooms and even snacks and cocktail lounges. The hotel's restaurants include top choices in Singapore, such as the highly regarded Rang Mahal Indian restaurant and the Chinese restaurant Hai Tien Lo. The rooftop pool has a huge, open sun deck area and a spa and fitness center with pool view.

7 Raffles Blvd., Marina Sq., Singapore 039595 (near Suntec City). ✆ **800/327-8585** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/525-900 in Australia, 800/969-496 in the U.K., or 65/6336-8111. Fax 65/6339-1861. www.singapore.panpacific.com. 784 units. S$454 ($300/£200) double; from S$645 ($430/£290) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage, and spa treatments; concierge; limousine service; shuttle service; business center; shopping arcade adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. In room: A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Swissôtel The Stamford ★ (Value) With more than 1,000 rooms and 73 floors, this immense tower is the tallest hotel in Southeast Asia. The Stamford is now getting a much-needed face-lift, with a refurbishment program that was launched in 2008, working its way down from the 27th floor. Even if you can't manage to get a renovated room, you'll be rewarded with a great bird's-eye view of Singapore island, from the historic Padang beneath to the business district and the iconic harbor. If that's not enough, just head upstairs to the Equinox bar. At 226m (742 ft.), you can see almost the entire island and beyond. This hotel is in a great location, over the City Hall MRT and Raffles City Mall, and it also shares many of its facilities—including swimming pools and restaurants—with its sister hotel, the Fairmont.

2 Stamford Rd., Singapore 178882. ✆ **800/637-9477** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/121-043 in Australia, or 65/6338-8585. Fax 65/6338-2862. www.swissotel-thestamford.com. 1,200 units. S$436 ($290/£200) double; S$1,054 ($710/£470) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** 12 restaurants; martini bar, lobby lounge, and a live jazz venue; outdoor pool; spa w/gym, Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Albert Court Hotel ★ (Value) This eight-story boutique hotel has revitalized a block of charming prewar shophouses and given it Western-style comforts. Decorators placed local Peranakan touches everywhere from the carved teak furnishings in traditional floral design to the antique china cups used for tea service in the rooms. Like most heritage hotels in Singapore, guest rooms aren't large, but details like the teak molding, bathroom tiles in bright Peranakan colors, and old-time brass electrical switches give this place real

charm. Albert Court offers new courtyard rooms in the renovated houses that front the hotel's courtyard; these rooms contain all the local touches that make this hotel stand out from the rest. This hotel is especially attractive if you wish to spend a lot of time shopping and eating in Little India, which is just across the street.

180 Albert St., Singapore 189971. ✆ **65/6339-3939.** Fax 65/6339-3252. www.albertcourt.com.sg. 210 units. S$218 ($150/£100) double. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to either Bugis or Little India MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; small lobby lounge; tour desk; limited room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Allson Hotel Singapore ★ (Value) Allson continues to be a strong tourist-class hotel in the city's Historic District. Five floors have been renovated so far, with an ongoing program scheduled for 2009, which will increase the number of premium rooms. Standard deluxe guest rooms are a good size, and simply but pleasantly decorated. Carved rosewood furniture—headboards, side tables, and armchairs in quaint Ming-style carvings—are an elegant touch for such moderately priced accommodations. Premium rooms are more European in flavor, with free Internet and soft drinks. They're certainly attractive but sadly lacking the carved furniture that gives standard rooms their charm. Bathrooms are very small, but clean. The small pool area and even smaller gym have received some maintenance touch-ups. There are no views here, but with a good location and modest prices, Allson remains a great choice for value-conscious leisure travelers.

101 Victoria St., Singapore 188018. ✆ **65/6336-0811.** Fax 65/6339-7019. www.allsonhotels.com. 450 units. S$218 ($150/£100) deluxe double; from S$339 ($230/£150) double. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk from Bugis Junction MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; small outdoor pool; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; tour desk; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

Peninsula • Excelsior Hotel ★★ (Value) As its rather uninspiring name suggests, this huge hotel was created when two of the city's busiest tourist-class hotels merged, combining their lobby, pools, and other facilities into one giant value-for-money property popular with tour groups. The location is excellent, in the Historic District within walking distance to Chinatown and Boat Quay, with some fantastic views over the city, the Singapore River, and the marina. A long-overdue renovation is finally taking place, and tired rooms are being freshened up. All the rooms in the Excelsior tower have now been renovated, and the Peninsula revamp is continuing into 2009. If you can bag a refurbished room overlooking Marina Bay, you'll be getting a great deal.

5 Coleman St., Singapore 179805. ✆ **65/6337-2200.** Fax 65/6336-3847. www.ytchotels.com.sg. 600 units. S$190 ($130/£90) double; from S$295 ($200/£130) club rooms, suites. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to City Hall MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar and lobby lounge; 2 outdoor pools; fitness center w/Jacuzzi; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping mall adjacent; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. In room: A/C, TV, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Inexpensive

Perak Hotel ★ This pretty budget hotel on the edge of Little India has real character. Its location in a row of white and blue shophouses gives it charm, and there are nice decorative touches with local fabrics and simple wooden furniture. As with most conversions, guests need to accept a few quirks as well: The atmospheric wooden floors can be noisy, and the guest rooms, though clean and tidy, are small, with tiny and basic bathrooms. Superior rooms are pleasant with shuttered windows, but many standard rooms rely on skylights instead. It's popular with the friendly backpacking crowd that gathers in the lobby and cafe to chat and make use of the free Internet.

12 Perak Rd., Singapore 208133. ✆ **65/6299-7733.** Fax 65/6392-0919. www.peraklodge.com. 34 units. S$148 ($100/£67) double; S$228 ($150/£100) triple, including breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Bugis or Little India MRT. **Amenities:** Cafe; tour desk; business center; laundry service; dry cleaning; free high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, TV.

CHINATOWN

M Hotel Singapore ★★ If work brings you to the Shenton Way downtown business district, then M Hotel is your best bet. Cornering the international business travel market, everything here is designed to make life easier for those with places to go and people to see. Rooms feature large, comfortable workspaces in clutter-free tones (blond wood furnishings, bone upholstery, tan carpeting), with some splashes of darker textiles for variety. Broadband Internet access and laptop safes make for extra convenience. The 11th floor is reserved for unwinding, with pool, spa, and fitness center all in sanitary contemporary white with glass-and-chrome accents everywhere. Good weekend deals are available, but leisure travelers won't find much to inspire in the financial district at evenings or weekends. Operated by local firm Hatch, the spa has an excellent menu and reputation for quality. M Hotel's restaurants are packed for power lunches, so book in advance.

81 Anson Rd., Singapore 079908. ✆ **866/866-8086** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/147-803 in Australia, 800/782-542 in New Zealand, 800/8686-8086 in the U.K., or 65/6224-1133. Fax 65/6222-0749. www.millenniumhotels.com. 413 units. S$378 ($250/£170) double; S$700 ($470/£320) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to Tanjong Pagar MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool w/2 Jacuzzis; fitness center w/rock-climbing wall; spa; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

New Majestic Hotel ★★ The Art Deco New Majestic Hotel is achingly stylish, with a shining white lobby dotted with a collection of classic chairs that represent the best of 20th-century design. The guest rooms are large, each designed by a Singaporean artist with an unlimited budget. The popular Wayang room, named after traditional Chinese opera, is scarlet and black, with walls entirely covered in fine red silk. Pussy Parlour is a confection of fuchsia and electric blue, with silk crepe sheets and a champagne bar in red lacquer. There are also more understated and practical rooms, though they're no less creative. High-quality amenities include Kiehl's toiletries, Bose systems, espresso machines, and iPod docking stations. The New Majestic proudly boasts "Singapore's smallest pool." The only pool permitted in a conservation building, this compact rectangle of mosaic tiling is placed above the restaurant and features glass portholes in its floor.

31–37 Bukit Pasoh Rd., Singapore 089845. ✆ **65/6511-4700.** Fax 65/6227-3301. www.newmajestichotel.com. 30 units. S$400 ($270/£180) double; from S$750 ($500/£340) suite. AE, MC, V. 1-min. walk to Outram Park MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; fitness center; concierge; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Swissôtel Merchant Court ★ Merchant Court is beautifully located in the city center, within easy walking distance of Chinatown and the historic and financial districts. Colorful Clarke Quay opposite offers a superb range of restaurants, cafes, and nightlife, and Robertson and Boat Quays are a short, pleasant stroll along the river. A mall and the MRT are right on the doorstep. All that convenience means it's a busy, buzzing part of town, particularly at night, but the large attractive pool and terrace area gives some room to relax, and the Amrita spa is excellent. Standard (Classic) rooms are simple and pleasant, not large, and with good-size bathrooms. Renovated business rooms are larger and more stylish, with striking geometric carpets and wall panels; there's an executive lounge

on the top floor. Although the hotel is largely geared toward business travelers, if you give advance notice, staff can create a special Kids Room, accessorized with bright rugs, age-appropriate toys, and DVDs.

20 Merchant Rd., Singapore 058281. ✆ **800/637-9477** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/121-043 in Australia, 800/637-94771 in the U.K., or 65/6337-2288. Fax 65/6334-0606. www.swissotel-merchantcourt.com. 476 units. S$330 ($220/£150) double; from S$750 ($500/£340) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Clarke Quay MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center and spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage, and beauty treatments; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

The Inn at Temple Street ★★ They've done a lovely job with this modest boutique hotel. In the heart of Chinatown's tourism hustle and bustle, step into the small lobby to be greeted by pretty antiques and Chinese porcelain. To the side of the lobby, a popular cafe serves Western and local meals three times a day. The friendly front desk handles everything from business center services to arranging laundry, tours, and postal services, but never seems frazzled. Naturally there's no elevator, and rooms can fairly be described as tiny, but they are quite modern for this type of hotel, with key-card locks, in-room safe, tea and coffee, minibar, TV, and room service. Decor is atmospheric, too, with carved wooden bedsteads and pretty fabrics. The black-and-white-tiled bathrooms are nice, though you'll need to opt for a deluxe room if you want a bathtub rather than a shower. Attractive, affordable, and friendly.

36 Temple St., Singapore 058581. ✆ **65/6221-5333.** Fax 65/6225-5391. www.theinn.com.sg. 42 units. S$228 ($152/£100) double; S$328 ($220/£150) family. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Chinatown MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; room service; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, in-room safe.

Inexpensive

Hotel 1929 ★ (Finds) This trendy, inexpensive place is a real gem in Chinatown, operated by the same people behind the swish New Majestic. Though its target market is very different, there are some clues to the shared parentage in its love of vintage chairs and retro design. The hotel's shophouse location means that rooms are small and quirkily shaped (many of the toilets are extremely close to the shower, but clever design and an eye for detail makes for pleasant, well-organized spaces with real personality). Some of the cheapest rooms have no windows, and facilities are limited to a Jacuzzi and sun deck—though its busy and sometimes noisy location doesn't really lend itself to sunbathing. Staff is friendly and helpful, and the Ember restaurant is popular.

50 Keong Saik Rd., Singapore 089154. ✆ **65/6347-1929.** Fax 65/6327-1929. S$200 ($130/£90) double; from S$350 ($230/£160) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Outram Park MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Jacuzzi; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

ORCHARD ROAD AREA

Very Expensive

Four Seasons Hotel Singapore ★★★ The Four Seasons has a residential atmosphere, and there's a sense of intimacy and peace that's unusual among international hotels. The hotel is smaller than many of its competitors, and the personable staff delivers ultra-efficient service. Located just off Orchard Road, extensive gardens block out many of the sights and sounds of the city center. As well as the elegant pools, there are indoor and outdoor tennis courts (with a resident professional), a spa, and fully staffed

fitness area. A 2008 refurbishment added state-of-the-art entertainment systems and plasma TVs. Premier rooms and suites are huge, with antiques and artworks selected from the Four Seasons's large collection. Superior rooms are also unusually large and comfortable, decorated in tasteful ivory and chestnut with high ceilings and the kind of comforts that come at a premium elsewhere. Consider a standard room here before a suite in a less expensive hotel.

190 Orchard Blvd., Singapore 248646. ✆ **800/332-3442** in the U.S., 800/268-6282 in Canada, or 65/6734-1110. Fax 65/6733-0682. www.fourseasons.com. 254 units. S$550 ($370/£250) double; from S$720 ($480/£320) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 2 outdoor pools w/adjacent Jacuzzis; 2 outdoor, lighted tennis courts and 2 indoor air- conditioned tennis courts; Singapore's best-equipped fitness center; spa w/sauna, steam, massage, and full menu of beauty and relaxation treatments; billiards room; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-room laserdisc player w/complimentary disks available, Wi-Fi, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

St. Regis Hotel ★★★ Singapore's newest luxury hotel opened in early 2008. Touted as a six-star property, it's distinctly palatial and ornate, with patterned fabrics and carpeting, dainty crockery, and huge chandeliers. Guests are chauffeured in Bentleys. Guest rooms feature walnut furniture, silks, and plush couches, and are full of gadgets, with Bose sound systems, plasma TVs, and lighting panels. Enormous marble-clad bathrooms have flatscreen TVs in the mirror facing the tub. Each floor is serviced by discreet and expert butlers. Grand Deluxe rooms overlook the greenery of the exclusive Tanglin and Nassim areas. Toiletries are from the in-house Remède spa, with a wet lounge, which is complimentary for guests. While you're there, consider the Remède's version of a hot stone massage, which uses huge silken pebbles of pure jade. Facilities are of the high standard that you would expect, though the pool area is overlooked by nearby towers.

29 Tanglin Rd., Singapore 247911. ✆ **877/ST-REGIS** [787-3447] in the U.S. and Canada, 800/221-637 in Australia, 800/450-561 in New Zealand, 800/325-78734 in the U.K., or 65/6506-6888. Fax 65/6506-6708. www.starwoodhotels.com. 299 units. S$545 ($370/£250) double; from S$1,400 ($940/£630) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 15-min. walk to Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pools w/Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor, indoor air- conditioned tennis courts; fitness center; spa w/wet room, sauna, steam, massage, comprehensive menu of beauty and relaxation treatments; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, plasma TVs w/satellite programming and in-room entertainment center, Wi-Fi, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe w/charging point.

Shangri-La Hotel ★★★ On 6 hectares (15 acres) of tropical gardens, the Shang's 750 rooms are spread across three wings, each tailored to meet the needs of different travelers. The Tower Wing rooms are aimed at the business traveler, with modern blond wood, an uncluttered appearance, and large work areas. Bay windows offer floor-to-ceiling views over the city. Leisure travelers prefer the tropical feel of the Garden Wing, where large rooms have balconies that overlook the gardens. Celebrities, government leaders, and high rollers favor the ultra-exclusive Valley Wing, which has a separate private driveway and entrance, butler service, complimentary champagne bar, and personalized stationery. Its rooms and suites are some of the largest in Singapore, elegant and supremely comfortable with luxurious bathrooms and separate dressing rooms. The hotel's limousine airport transfer is free to Tower Wing guests.

22 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 258350. ✆ **800/942-5050** in the U.S., 866/344-5050 in Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, or 65/6737-3644. Fax 65/6737-3257. www.shangri-la.com. 750 units. S$530 ($360/£240) Tower double; S$740 ($500/£330) Garden double; S$901

The Best of Singapore's Spas

Singapore's most celebrated spa, **Amrita** (the Fairmont, Level 6, 2 Stamford Rd.; ✆ **65/6336-4477;** and Swissôtel Merchant Court, Level 2, 20 Merchant Rd.; ✆ **65/6239-1780;** www.amritaspas.com), is the largest spa in Singapore, with Southeast Asian–inspired interiors and treatments—more than 1,000 to choose from.

If you want more of a retreat spa experience, **Spa Botanica** (2 Bukit Manis Rd., The Sentosa; ✆ **65/6371-1318;** www.spabotanica.com) is a gorgeous pick. It has 6,000 sq. m (64,584 sq. ft.) of designated spa space, with pools, mud baths, and treatment pavilions nestled in lush gardens. Treatments center around natural recipes for beauty and relaxation, including spice and floral treatments.

($600/£410) Valley double; from S$1,000 ($670/£450) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lobby lounge; resort-style outdoor landscaped pool; 3-hole pitch and putt course; 4 outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center looking out into gardens; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam; massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

Sheraton Towers Singapore ★★ Sheraton's lobby is lined with service awards. With the deluxe (standard) room they'll give you a suit pressing on arrival, daily newspaper delivery, shoeshine service, and complimentary movies. These refurbished rooms are handsome with textured walls, plush carpeting, and a bed luxuriously fitted with down pillows and dreamy 100% Egyptian cotton bedding. Upgrade to a Tower room, and you get a personal butler, complimentary nightly cocktails and morning breakfast, free laundry, free local calls, your own pants press, and free use of the personal trainer in the fitness center. The cabana rooms, off the pool area, have all the services of the Tower Wing in a very private resort room. Each of the 23 one-of-a-kind suites features a different theme: Chinese regency, French, Italian, jungle—you name it. Although Sheraton is a luxe choice, you can find better deals, price-wise.

39 Scotts Rd., Singapore 228230. ✆ **800/325-3535** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/073-535 in Australia, 800/325-35353 in New Zealand, 800/353535 in the U.K., or 65/6737-6888. Fax 65/6737-1072. www.sheraton.com. 413 units. S$520 ($350/£230) double; from S$1,200 ($800/£540) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Newton MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor landscaped pool; fitness center w/sauna and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Grand Hyatt Singapore ★★ The unusual lobby, with glass windows set at right angles and a reception desk hidden around the corner, brings good feng shui to this excellent hotel. In public spaces, floors of polished cream or black marble are offset by deep wood and streams trickling slowly over hand-chiseled rocks. Guest rooms in the Terrace

Wing are decked out in shades of cr eam and gray with good wor k desks and big marble bathrooms. Even better ar e the G rand Wing rooms, which ar e really suites with separate living ar eas, small walk-in closets, B ang & O lufsen TVs, and a separate wor k ar ea. The free-form pool was o verhauled in 2008 and is beautifully landscaped with wooden decks and loungers that sit in shallow water. The new Japanese-designed Damai spa and state-of-the-art fitness center overlook the incredible five-story waterfall that sits in the center of the hotel. This is an oasis just steps away fr om the busiest intersection in the city.

10 S cotts Rd ., Singapor e 228211. ✆ **800/223-1234** in the U .S. and C anada, or 65/6738-1234. F ax 65/6732-1696. w ww.singapore.grand.hyatt.com. 663 units . S$442 ($300/£200) double; fr om S$565 ($378/£254) Grand Deluxe double. AE, DC, MC, V. Near Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 2 bars; live music bar; landscaped outdoor pool; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; squash court and badminton court; excellent fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, outstanding spa; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, laptop-size safe w/charging ports.

Meritus Mandarin Singapore ★ This tour group favorite is brilliantly located in the center of O rchard Road. A multiphased r enovation pr oject launched in 2008 has moved the main lobb y around the corner to O rchard Link, and a fifth-floor walkway now connects the hotel's two wings. ***A cautionary note:*** The Mandarin's first four floors are being conv erted into a shopping mall—wor k that has closed the pool and will continue to cause some disr uption until fall/winter 2009. G uest r ooms ar e also due for renovations in 2009, so it 's w orth checking for bargains while the wor k is ongoing. Try for a P remier r oom, on higher floors and much quieter , which ar e mor e spacious and luxurious. The tower and rooftop revolving restaurant was a landmark when it opened in 1973. Sadly it no longer r evolves, but the Chatterbo x restaurant still offers S ingaporean specialties such as chicken rice with r emarkable 360-degree city views.

333 Or chard Rd ., Singapor e 238867. ✆ **65/6737-4411.** F ax 65/6732-2361. w ww.asiatravel.com/singapore/mandarin. 1,051 units. S$341 ($230/£150) double; fr om S$691 ($463/£310) suit e. AE, DC, MC, V. Near Or chard MR T. **Amenities:** 4 r estaurants; obser vation lounge and lobb y lounge; out door pool (closed for renovation to late 2009); fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; tour desk; limousine ser vice; business c enter; shopping ar cade; salon; r oom ser vice; babysitting; same-day laundry ser vice; dr y cleaning; nonsmok ing r ooms; ex ecutive-level r ooms. *In r oom:* A/C, TV w/sat ellite programming and in-house mo vies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

Singapore Marriott Hotel ★★ The towering green and scarlet-roofed pagoda of the Marriott is a landmar k at the corner of O rchard and Scott r oads. Geared strongly toward business travelers, its central location, next to Orchard MRT, makes sightseeing convenient, too. The cosmopolitan lobby is perfect for informal meetings or a comfor table coffee stop. Crossroads Café, which spills fr om the hotel onto the side walk, is one of S ingapore's most popular spots to see and be seen. The pagoda tower means that r ooms aren't large, though they ar e cozy and inviting and equipped with all the comfor ts and conv eniences y ou'd expect for business travel. Leisure travelers may find the pool-terrace r ooms and suites more interesting. They're elegant little cabins that ar e surprisingly r esortlike considering the Orchard Road location. Each has a poolside v eranda, wooden floors with r ugs, and skylights over the open-plan bathroom, and features walls of car ved stone.

320 Orchard Rd., Singapore 238865. ✆ **800/228-9290** in the U .S. and C anada, 800/251-259 in A ustralia, 800/22-12-22 in the U .K., or 65/6735-5800. F ax 65/6735-9800. w ww.singaporemarriott.com. 373 units . S$324 ($220/£150) double; from S$640 ($430/£290) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lobby lounge, bar w/live jazz, and dance club w/live bands; outdoor pool w/Jacuzzi; outdoor basketball c ourt; fitness c enter w/Jacuzzi, sauna, st eam, and massage; c oncierge; limousine ser vice; business

center; shopping arcade; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, laptop-size safe w/charging port.

Moderate

Hilton International Singapore This Hilton doesn't measure up with some of its other properties worldwide and definitely can't compete with other hotels in this price category in Singapore. The most famous feature of the Hilton is its glamorous shopping arcade, where you can find your Donna Karan, Louis Vuitton, Gucci—all the greats. With all this, the guest rooms should be pretty sumptuous, no? Well, no. The rooms are simpler than you'd expect, with nothing flashy or overdone. Floor-to-ceiling windows are in each, and although views in the front of the hotel are of Orchard Road and the Thai Embassy property, views in the back are not so hot. In this day and age when business-class hotels are wrestling to outdo each other, Hilton has a lot of catching up to do.

581 Orchard Rd., Singapore 238883. ✆ **800/445-8667** in the U.S., or 65/6737-2233. Fax 65/6732-2917. www.singapore.hilton.com. 423 units. S$300 ($200/£90) double; from S$660 ($440/£300) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Near Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna and steam; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Orchard Parade Hotel ★★ Value Kids This Mediterranean-style gem is right at the top of Orchard Road. The family studios are large and comfortable, with a king-size bed and lounge area, dining area, and spacious bathroom, plus two extra single beds behind a partition. There's a balcony too, though the view over the busy junction of Tanglin and Orchard Road isn't exactly peaceful. Deluxe double rooms are also spacious, pleasant, and bright, though the bathrooms are fairly basic. Views are variable, so specify at booking if that's important to you. Standard double and twin rooms tend to face the building at the back of the hotel, so your view's likely to be of concrete. On the sixth-floor roof there's a colorful terra-cotta-tiled pool area, and the terrace outside is convenient for coffee shops and family restaurants. It's a 10-minute walk to the Botanic Gardens and Orchard MRT.

1 Tanglin Rd., Singapore 247905. ✆ **65/6737-1133.** Fax 65/6733-0242. www.orchardparade.com.sg. 387 units. S$259 ($170/£120) double; S$550 ($370/£250) family studio; from S$450 ($300/£200) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center; concierge; tour desk; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer.

York Hotel Singapore ★ This charming little hotel has gotten even better in the past year thanks to a modernization program that's smartened up the rooms and extended the business and fitness facilities. Pale, contemporary furnishings in neutral colors lend a calming atmosphere to the guest rooms. Superior rooms aren't particularly large, so if you want more space, upgrade to one of the spacious deluxe or colorful cabana rooms that look out over the pool. The York's location, 10 minutes' walk from Orchard Road, offers a good compromise between accessibility and a moderately relaxing environment. Staff here is extremely professional and courteous. All these improvements mean that rates have risen to match, and the York isn't the steal it used to be, but it remains a consistently good value option. The buffet breakfast seems to be disproportionately expensive—try to get an inclusive rate or head to Orchard Road instead.

21 Mount Elizabeth, Singapore 228516. ✆ **800/223-5652** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/553-549 in Australia, 800/447-555 in New Zealand, 800/89-88-52 in the U.K., or 65/6737-0511. Fax 65/6732-1217.

www.yorkhotel.com.sg. 407 units. S$306 ($210/£140) double; from S$650 ($440/£290) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 10-min. walk to Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center; Jacuzzi; tour desk; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities.

Inexpensive

RELC International Hotel ★★ (Value) Part of an English-language center, this traveler-class hotel offers great value for money and very personable staff. Rooms start at the Standard Budget twin. These resemble a two-bed dorm, very basic with a shared lobby and bathroom between two rooms. But at just S$150 ($100/£70), including taxes, these are on a level with standard dorm prices elsewhere, so they're a hit with backpackers. Alcove and Executive rooms offer balconies, minibars, newspapers, and cable TV and the large Hollywood Queen sleeps four comfortably. There's a small fitness area but no pool, and it's a brisk 10- to 15-minute walk to Orchard Road.

30 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 258352. ✆ **65/6885-7888.** Fax 65/6733-9976. www.relc.org.sg. 128 units. S$150 ($100/£70) double; from S$190 ($130/£90) Alcove suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 15-min. walk to Orchard MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; same-day laundry service plus self-service launderette; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker (in some rooms), hair dryer.

YMCA International House (Kids) With a superb location at the lower end of Orchard Road, this budget gem is very convenient for sightseeing and getting around by mass transit. The guest rooms have been renovated and have private bathrooms that are better than those at some much pricier hotels. All rooms have air-conditioning, a telephone (with free local calls), color television, and a stock-it-yourself refrigerator, but be warned, all standard double-occupancy rooms are twin beds only. The dormitories are small, dark, and quiet, with two bunk beds per room. Across the hall are men's and women's locker rooms for showering. Most of the public areas have no air-conditioning, including the old fitness facility, billiards center, and squash courts—so be warned: They can become unbearably hot. The rooftop pool is nothing special, but a full-time lifeguard is on duty. There's a coffee shop in the lobby. The staff is amazingly friendly.

1 Orchard Rd., Singapore 238824. ✆ **65/6336-6000.** Fax 65/6337-3140. www.ymcaih.com.sg. 111 units. S$105 ($70/£50) double; S$135 ($90/£60) family room; S$145 ($100/£70) superior room. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Dhoby Ghaut MRT. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; outdoor pool; small gym; game room; tour desk; babysitting; same-day laundry service; Internet center. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

SENTOSA ISLAND

Sentosa's island getaway gets bigger every year, with new attractions, hotels, and facilities being added all the time. Thanks to a huge land reclamation and building project, the island itself is expanding geographically, too. Sentosa's hotels are geared toward couples on romantic breaks and young families, attracted by the beach resort feel and the accessibility of the city.

The Sentosa Resort & Spa ★★ This resort was fashioned after the luxury resorts of Phuket, Thailand, and designers have done a great job combining clean modern lines with tropical touches and courtyard gardens to produce a sophisticated getaway with relaxing charm. Lazy terraces and cozy alcoves tucked all over the grounds invite guests to unwind in privacy—perfect for intimate candlelight dinners that can be requested anywhere you like. The centerpiece is Spa Botanica; its garden massages, treatments, and frangipani baths are repeatedly voted some of the world's best.

The standard guest rooms in the five-story hotel building are small but stunning, featuring camphor burl-wood doors and accents and Thai silk screens in natural browns and greens. Ask for views of the golf course, which are prettier than the views of the hotel courtyards and buildings. The four Garden Villas are supremely romantic and luxurious. Butlers wait around the clock to serve you—a standard feature for all rooms.

2 Bukit Manis Rd., Sentosa, Singapore 099891. ✆ **65/6275-0331.** Fax 65/6275-0228. www.thesentosa.com. 205 units. S$392 ($260/£180) double; from S$565 ($380/£250) suite; S$1,500 ($1,010/£680) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants, bar; lounge; gorgeous midnight blue-tiled outdoor pool w/views of the harbor; golf at nearby facilities; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts w/coach; 2 squash courts; fitness center w/20m (66-ft.) lap pool, Jacuzzi, and sauna; luxury spa w/private pool, mud baths, steam, Jacuzzis, exercise and relaxation classes, salon, beauty treatments, and massage; concierge; tour desk; limousine service; shuttle service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Shangri-La's Rasa Sentosa Resort Kids Set on an immaculate white-sand beach fringed with coconut palms, this is Singapore's only true beachfront hotel. Great outdoor activities make the Rasa Sentosa particularly attractive, with a sea-sports center offering windsurfing, sailing, and paddle skiing. There's a large free-form swimming pool in the gardens, a jogging track, aqua-bike rentals, an outdoor Jacuzzi, and a fully equipped spa with gym, sauna, body and facial treatments, hydromassage, and massage therapies. For children, there is a separate pool with water slides (no lifeguard, though), a playground, a nursery, and a game room.

Each of the rooms has a balcony with a view over the hillside and the fort or the sea—go for the sea view. Though it's slightly more expensive, the view is exceptional, and if you don't go for it, you'll be missing out on glorious mornings, throwing back the curtains, and taking in the scenery from the balcony. The resort is connected to Singapore's downtown by frequent and free shuttles.

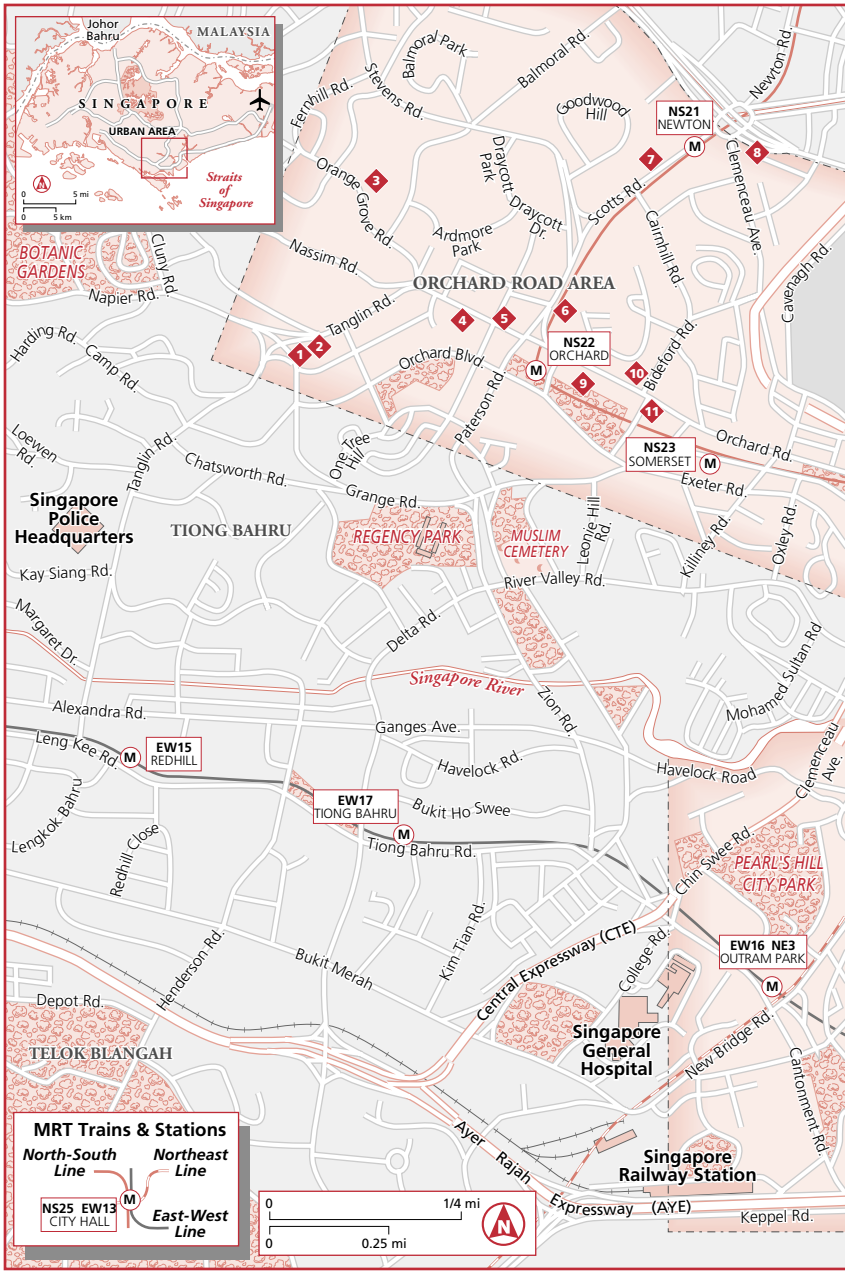
101 Siloso Rd., Sentosa, Singapore 098970. ✆ **800/942-5050** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, or 65/6275-0900. Fax 65/6275-1055. www.shangri-la.com. 459 units. S$342 ($230/£150) superior (hill view); from S$750 ($500/£340) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. See "Sentosa Island," later in this chapter, for public transportation. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; poolside bar and lobby lounge; outdoor lagoon-style pool w/children's pool and Jacuzzi; golf at nearby facilities; fitness center; spa w/sauna, steam, and massage; children's center; game room; shuttle service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

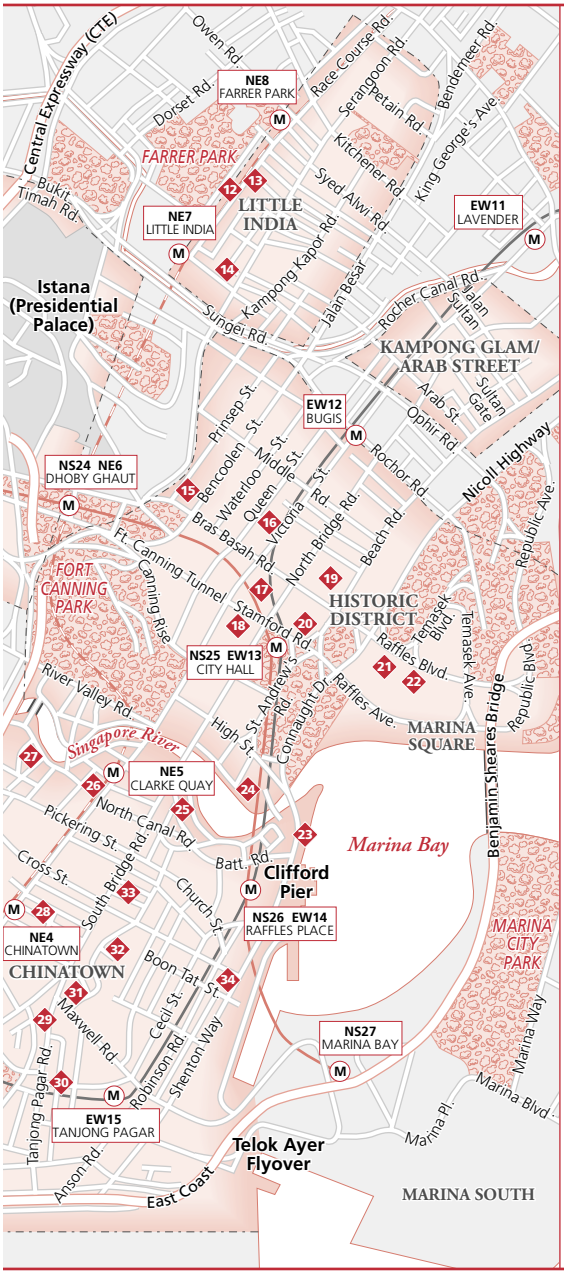
5 WHERE TO DINE

In Singapore you'll find a huge selection of local, regional, and international cuisine, served in settings that range from bustling hawker centers to grand and glamorous palaces of gastronomy. The food is authentic and many times the dining experience is entertainment in its own right. Various ethnic restaurants, with their traditional decor and serving styles, hold their own special sense of theater for foreigners; but Singaporeans don't stop there, dreaming up new concepts in cuisine and ambience to add fresh dimensions to the fine art of dining.

Many of Singapore's best restaurants are in its hotels. Hotels generally offer a wide variety of cuisine, and coffee shops almost always have Western selections. Shopping

Where to Dine in Urban Singapore





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malls have everything from food courts with local fast food to midpriced and upmarket establishments. Western fast-food outlets are always easy to find—McDonald's or Starbucks—but if you want something a little more local, you'll find coffee shops (called *kopitiam*) and small home-cookin' mom-and-pop joints down every back street. Then there are hawker centers and food courts where under one roof the meal choices go on and on.

SINGAPOREAN CUISINE

CHINESE The large Chinese population in Singapore makes this obviously the most common type of food you'll find, and any good description of Singaporean food should begin with the most prevalent Chinese regional styles. Many Chinese restaurants in the West are lumped into one category—Chinese—with only mild acknowledgment of Szechuan and dim sum. But China's a big place, and its size is reflected in its many different tastes, ingredients, and preparation styles.

A lot of hawker-center fare is inspired by regional Chinese home cooking. Local favorites include **carrot cake** (white radishes that are steamed and pounded until soft, then fried in egg, garlic, and chile), ***Hokkien bak ku teh*** (boiled pork ribs in a seasoned soup), ***Teochew kway teow*** (stir-fried rice noodles with egg, prawns, and fish), and the number-one favorite for foreigners, **Hainanese chicken rice** (boiled sliced chicken breast served over rice cooked in chicken stock). On p. 478, I've provided an overview of the hawker scene so you'll know where to find local food the way the locals eat it.

MALAY Malay cuisine combines Indonesian and Thai flavors, blending ginger, turmeric, chiles, lemon grass, and dried shrimp paste to make unique curries. Heavy on coconut milk and peanuts, Malay food can at times be on the sweet side. The most popular Malay curries are ***rendang,*** a dry, dark, and heavy coconut-based curry served over meat; ***sambal,*** a red and spicy chile sauce; and ***sambal belacan,*** a condiment of fresh chiles, dried shrimp paste, and lime juice. The ultimate Malay dish in Singapore is **satay,** sweet barbecued meat kabobs dipped in chile peanut sauce. ***Nasi lemak***—coconut rice surrounded by an assortment of fried anchovies, peanuts, egg, and sambal—is primarily a breakfast dish, but can be eaten anytime.

PERANAKAN This type of food came out of the Straits-born Chinese community and combines such mainland Chinese ingredients as noodles and oyster sauces with local Malay flavors of coconut milk and peanuts. ***Laksa lemak*** is a great example, mixing Chinese rice-flour noodles into a soup of Malay-style spicy coconut cream with chunks of seafood. Another favorite, ***popiah,*** is the Peranakan version of a spring roll, combining sweet turnip, chopped egg, chile sauce, and prawns in a delicate wrap. ***Otak-otak*** is unique: toasted mashed fish with coconut milk and chile, wrapped in a banana leaf and grilled over flames.

INDIAN **South Indian** food is a superhot blend of spices in a coconut-milk base. Rice is the staple, along with thin breads such as *prata* and *dosai,* which are good for scooping up drippy curries. Vegetarian dishes are abundant, and use lots of chickpeas and lentils in curry and chile sauces. ***Vindaloo,*** meat or poultry in a tangy and spicy sauce, is also well known. **Banana-leaf restaurants,** surely the most interesting way to experience South Indian food in Singapore, serve meals on banana leaves cut like place mats. It's very informal. Spoons and forks are provided, but if you want to act local and use your hands, remember to use your right hand only (see "Etiquette," earlier in this chapter), and don't forget to wash up before and after at the tap.

North Indian food combines yogurts and creams with a milder, more delicate blend of herbs and chiles. It's served most often with breads such as fluffy *naan* and flat *chapati.* Marinated meats such as chicken or fish, cooked in the tandoor clay oven, are always the highlight of a North Indian meal. North Indian restaurants are more upmarket and expensive than the southern ones, but while they offer more of the comforts associated with dining out, the southern banana-leaf experience is more of an adventure.

Some Singaporean variations on Indian cuisine are ***mee goreng,*** fried noodles with chile and curry sauce, and **fish-head curry,** a giant fish head simmered in a broth of coconut curry, chiles, and fragrant seasonings.

Muslim influences on Indian food have produced ***roti prata,*** a humble late-night snack of fried bread served with lentil sauce, and ***murtabak,*** a fried *prata* filled with minced meat, onion, and egg.

SEAFOOD Most important is the uniquely Singaporean **chile crab,** chopped and smothered in a thick, tangy chile sauce. **Pepper crabs** and **black-pepper crayfish** are also a thrill. Instead of chile sauce, these shellfish are served in a thick black-pepper-and-soy sauce.

FRUITS Varieties of banana, coconut, papaya, mango, and pineapple are available year-round; in addition, Southeast Asia has an amazing selection of exotic and almost unimaginable fruits, from the light and juicy star fruit to the red and hairy rambutan. If you dare, the fruit to sample—the veritable king of fruits—is the ***durian,*** a large, green, spiky fruit that, when cut open, smells worse than old tennis shoes. The "best" ones are in season every June, when Singaporeans go wild over them. In case you're curious, the fruit has a creamy texture and tastes lightly sweet and deeply musky.

TIPS ON DINING

- Most restaurants are open for lunch as early as 11am, but close around 2:30 or 3pm to give them a chance to set up for dinner, which begins around 6pm. Where closing times are listed, that is the time when the last order is taken. If you need to eat at odd hours, food centers serve all day and some hawker centers are open all night—see "Hawker Centers," p. 478.
- Don't tip. Restaurants always add gratuity to the bill. You can leave the small change, but the government discourages this practice.
- Some restaurants, especially the more fashionable or upscale ones, may require that reservations be made up to a couple of days in advance. Reservations are always recommended for Saturday and Sunday lunch and dinner, as eating is a favorite national pastime and a lot of families go out for weekend quality time together.
- Because Singapore is so hot, "dress casual" (meaning a shirt and slacks for men and a dress or skirt/slacks and top for women) is always a safe bet in moderate to expensive restaurants. For the very expensive restaurants, more formal attire is required, which in Singapore means jacket and tie for men, and a dressier outfit for women. For the cheap places, come as you are, as long as you're decent.
- If you're on a budget, remember that lunch at a hawker center can be as cheap as S$3.50 ($2.20/£1.20). Many places have set-price buffet lunches, but these can be as high as S$45 ($30/£20). Indian restaurants are great deals for inexpensive buffet lunches, which can be found as reasonably as S$10 ($6.25/£3.45) per person for all you can eat. Fortunately, Singapore is a haven for culinary diversity where it's possible to eat exotic foods to your heart's content, all while maintaining a shoestring budget.

- In recent years, Singaporeans have become more wine savvy and have begun importing estate-bottled wines from California, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, South Africa, France, and Germany. However, these bottles are heavily taxed. A bottle of wine with dinner starts at around S$50 ($31/£17), and a single glass runs between S$10 and S$25 ($6.25–$16/£3.45–£8.80), depending on the wine and the restaurant. Chinese restaurants usually don't charge corkage fees for bringing your own.

HISTORIC DISTRICT

Very Expensive

Inagiku ★★ JAPANESE Inagiku serves Japanese food that rivals some of Tokyo's best restaurants. The dining room is subdued and artistic, with recessed spotlights designed to illuminate the dish in front of you to maximum effect. It's all very cultured, despite some unfortunately chosen elevator music. Inagiku's kitchen is separated into teams, one specializing in sushi and sashimi that's outstandingly fresh and expertly prepared. The *tokusen sashimi moriawase* is a stunning assortment of fresh seafood presented in an ice-filled shell. The tempura—firm, fresh seafood and vegetables fried in batter that is incredibly light—is excellent. Lunchtime set menus offer a more affordable way to dine here, and the quality remains just as high. If sashimi isn't your thing, try the tenderloin and lobster. In addition to sake, there is a good selection of wines.

Raffles The Plaza, Level 3, 80 Bras Basah Rd. ✆ **65/6431-6156.** Reservations recommended. Set lunch S$40–S$120 ($27–$80/£18–£54); set dinner S$180–S$220 ($121–$147/£81–£99). AE, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Raffles Grill ★★★ FRENCH Dining in the grande dame of Singapore achieves a level of sophistication unmatched by any other five-star restaurant. The architectural charm and historic significance of the old hotel will transform dinner into a cultural event, but don't just come here for the ambience; the food is outstanding as well. Chef Jean-Charles changes the menu every season, and anything you order will be divine. The degustation menu, seven courses at S$220 ($115/£59), is the best way to explore their finest dishes if you have trouble choosing from an a la carte menu that features pigeon, lamb, suckling pig, veal, and a carving cart of amazing cuts of beef prepared to perfection. The 1,200-label wine list (going back to 1900 vintages) could be a history lesson, and if you'd like you can request the cellar master to select a wine to match each course. The fabulously attentive service will make you feel like you own the place. Formal dress is required.

Raffles Hotel, 1 Beach Rd. ✆ **65/6412-1816.** www.raffles.com. Reservations required. Main courses S$68–S$108 ($46–$72/£31–£49). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–2pm and 7–10pm; Sat 7–10pm.

Expensive

Doc Cheng's ★★ ASIAN The witty menu here tells the story of Doc Cheng, a mythological colonial figure who was a sought-after physician, local celebrity, and notorious drunk. His concept of "restorative foods" is therefore rather decadent; on the menu you'll find fabulous Pan-Asian dishes that are more flavorful than medicinal. The menu changes regularly, but you won't go wrong with perennial favorites such as the mouthwatering Szechuan rack of lamb and miso cod with bonito emulsion. The house wine is a Riesling (sweet wines are more popular with Singaporeans) from Raffles's own vineyard. Two dining areas allow you to dine alfresco under the veranda or in cool air-conditioning inside.

1 Beach Rd., Raffles Hotel Arcade #02–20, Level 2. ✆ **65/6412-1816.** www.raffles.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses S$44–S$56 ($30–$38/£20–£25). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–2pm; daily 7–10pm.

Equinox ★ CONTINENTAL/ASIAN From the top of the tallest hotel in Southeast Asia, you can see out past the marina to Malaysia and Indonesia—and the restaurant's three-tier design and floor-to-ceiling windows mean every table has a view. It's decorated in contemporary style with nice Chinese accents. Lunch is an extensive display of seafood served in a host of international recipes, with chefs searing scallops to order. Dinner is a la carte, with a menu that's divided between Eastern and Western cuisine, plus some dishes that combine Eastern and Western ingredients and cooking styles such as charred tuna steak with anchovy and chile sauce, coriander chimichurri and sweet potato, and hot smoked chicken on a spicy papaya and green mango salad. For dessert, order the Manjari chocolate pudding with sabayon, morello sorbet, and chile compote.

Raffles City, 2 Stamford Rd., Level 70. ✆ **65/6431-6156.** www.equinoxcomplex.com. Reservations required. Daily buffet lunch S$56 ($38/£25); dinner main courses S$40–S$68 ($27–$46/£18–£31). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–2:30pm, 3:30–5pm, and 6:30–11pm; Sun 11am–2:30pm and 7–11pm.

Lei Garden ★★ CHINESE/CANTONESE Lei Garden lives up to a great reputation for the highest quality Cantonese cuisine in one of the most elegant settings, nestled within the unique ambience of CHIJMES just outside its towering picture windows. Highly recommended dishes are the fried shrimp with tangerine peel and black bean sauce and crispy roasted kurobuta pork. If you reserve 24 hours in advance, try the beggar's chicken, a whole stuffed chicken wrapped and baked in a lotus leaf covered in yam, which makes the chicken moist with a delicate flavor you won't forget. Also try the barbecued Beijing duck, which is exquisite. Dim sum here is excellent. A small selection of French and Chinese wines is available.

30 Victoria St., CHIJMES #01–24. ✆ **65/6339-3822.** Reservations required. Small dishes S$22–S$68 ($15–$46/£10–£31). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm.

Tiffin Room ★ NORTH INDIAN Tiffin curry came from India and is named after the three-tiered containers that Indian workers would use to carry their lunch. The tiffin box idea was adopted by the British colonists, who changed around the recipes a bit so they weren't as spicy. The cuisine that evolved is pretty much what you'll find served at Raffles's Tiffin Room, where a buffet spread lets you select from a variety of curries, chutneys, rice, and Indian breads. Highlights include the red snapper with almond and cashew nut sauce and South Indian spring chicken cooked with coconut, but there's a vast array of vegetarian dishes to choose from, too. The restaurant is just inside the lobby entrance of Raffles Hotel and carries the trademark Raffles elegance throughout its decor. Very British Raj.

Raffles Hotel, 1 Beach Rd. ✆ **65/6412-1816.** www.raffles.com. Reservations recommended. All meals served buffet-style. Breakfast S$45 ($30/£20); lunch S$48 ($32/£22); high tea S$39 ($26/£18); dinner S$52 ($35/£23). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 7–10am, noon–2:30pm, 3:30–5:30pm (high tea), and 7–10pm.

Moderate

Imperial Herbal ★★ CHINESE HERBAL After 20 years at the Metropole Hotel, Imperial Herbal has moved to a bigger site at the VivoCity shopping center. However, loyal regulars are still coming for the healing powers of the food served here, enriched with herbs and other secret ingredients prescribed by a resident Chinese herbalist. Upon entering, you'll be ushered to the herb counter. The herbalist, Dr. Foo, who is also trained in Western medicine, will ask for the symptoms of what ails you and take your pulse. While you sit and order (from a range of set menus or an extensive a la carte menu of meats, seafood, and vegetable dishes), he'll prepare a packet of ingredients and ship them

off to the kitchen, where they'll be added to the food in preparation. Surprisingly, dishes turn out tasty, without the anticipated medicinal aftertaste.

Dr. Foo is in house for dinner every night except Sunday. It's always good to call ahead, though, as he's the main attraction. When you leave, present him with a small *ang pau*—a gift of cash in a red envelope—maybe S$5 ($3.40/£2.30) or S$10 ($6.70/£4.50). Red envelopes (an auspicious color symbolizing luck and prosperity for the Chinese) are available in any card or gift shop.

VivoCity, Lobby G #03-08. ✆ **65/6337-0491.** Reservations recommended for lunch, necessary for dinner. Small dishes S$18–S$32 ($12–$21/£5–£14). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:15–10:30pm.

IndoChine Waterfront ★★★ VIETNAMESE/LAO/CAMBODIAN/FRENCH IndoChine Waterfront shares the stately Empress Place Building with the Asian Civilisations Museum, enhancing the sophistication of its chic Oriental decor. The views over the water make for true romance. The menu combines the best dishes from the Indochinese region, many with hints of the French cuisine that was added into regional palates during colonial days. Their two most popular dishes are the house specialty beef stew ragout and the pepper beef with sweet-and-sour sauce. More traditional Vietnamese favorites, such as spring rolls and prawns grilled on sugar cane, are fresh starters. After dinner, don't miss the Vietnamese coffee; it's mindblowingly delicious. The only weakness here is the slightly lackluster service, but the concept and food has proved so popular that IndoChine now has several bars and restaurants around the city. After Waterfront, the best are in a quaint Chinatown shophouse (49B Club St.; ✆ **65/6323-0503**) and Wisma Atria on Orchard Road #01–18/23 (✆ **65/6238-3470**).

1 Empress Place, Asian Civilisations Museum. ✆ **65/6339-1720.** www.indochine.com.sg. Reservations required. Main dishes S$24–S$46 ($16–$31/£7–£21). AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Fri noon–2:30pm and 6:30–11:30pm; Fri–Sat noon–2:30pm and 6:30pm–12:30am.

Pierside Kitchen & Bar ★ SEAFOOD A light and healthy menu centers on seafood prepared with fresh flavors in a wide variety of international recipes, such as the house specialty cumin-spiced crab cakes with marinated cucumber and chile or the lobster linguine. A new menu has added some new favorites, including Maine lobsters with sweet basil and chile and chargrilled octopus. Nothing can compete with the view—the panoramic view of the Esplanade Theatres and the marina is lovely. After sundown, the alfresco dining area cools off with breezes from the water and the stars make for some romantic dining. Relax, enjoy the scenery, and linger over raspberry and litchi soufflé or the divine seven textures of dark chocolate.

Unit 01–01, One Fullerton, 1 Fullerton Rd. ✆ **65/6438-0400.** Reservations recommended. Main courses S$32–S$45 ($21–$30/£14–£20). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11:30am–2:30pm and 7–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 7–11pm.

Inexpensive

Magic Wok (Value) THAI Here's an excellent value-for-money restaurant in town. The decor doesn't do much, it's usually crowded, and staff doesn't pamper, but food is reliably good and cheap. Thai favorites include a spicy tom yam seafood soup that doesn't skimp on the seafood, a mild green curry with chicken, and sweet pineapple rice. If you come too late, the yummy fried chicken chunks wrapped in pandan leaf will be sold out. If you're adventurous, the fried baby squid are crunchy and sweet. During busy times, you'll have to line up, but it moves fast. Other outlets are located at #03-23/25 Novena Square, 238 Thomson Rd. (✆ **65/6352-9077**), and #01-17/18 Ten Mile Junction, 1 Woodlands Rd. (✆ **65/6766 9813**).

#01–20 Capitol Bldg., 11 Stamford Rd. ✆ **65/6338-1882.** Reservations not accepted. Small dishes S$5–S$18 ($3.40–$12/£2.30–£8.10). MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Our Village ★ NORTH INDIAN With its antique white walls stuccoed in delicate and exotic patterns and glistening with tiny silver mirrors, you'll feel like you're in an Indian fairyland here. Even the ceiling twinkles with silver stars, and hanging lanterns provide a subtle glow for the heavenly atmosphere—it's a perfect setting for a delicate dinner. Every dish here is made fresh from hand-selected imported ingredients, some of them coming from secret sources (the staff is very protective of its recipes). There are vegetarian selections as well as meats (no beef or pork) prepared in luscious gravies or in the tandoor oven. The dishes are light and healthy, with all-natural ingredients and not too much salt.

46 Boat Quay (take elevator to 5th floor). ✆ **65/6538-3058.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Small dishes S$9–S$24 ($6–$16/£4.10–£11). AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–1:45pm and 6–11:30pm; Sat–Sun 6–11:30pm.

Rendezvous MALAY/INDONESIAN Line up to select from a large number of Malay dishes, cafeteria-style, such as sambal squid in a spicy sauce of chile and shrimp paste and beef *rendang* in a dark spicy curry sauce. The waitstaff will bring your order to your table. The old-style coffee shop setting instills a sense of nostalgia for locals. On the wall, black-and-white photos trace the restaurant's history from its opening in the early '50s. It's a great place to experiment with a new cuisine.

#02–02/03 Hotel Rendezvous, 9 Bras Basah Rd. ✆ **65/6339-7508.** Reservations not necessary. Meat dishes sold per piece S$4–S$7 ($2.70–$4.70/£1.80–£3.20). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–9pm. Closed on public holidays.

CHINATOWN

Moderate

Da Paolo il Ristorante ★★★ ITALIAN This Italian-owned place in trendy Club Street is coolly elegant, with white washed walls and starched linens, but has a casual, comfortable feel. The pasta is made fresh every morning and often served with seafood in classic and modern Italian style. The house specialty of squid ink spaghetti, lightly dressed with olive oil and garlic, is divine, and the homemade tiramisu shouldn't be missed. The owners have other branches that are equally satisfying: **Da Paolo il Giardino** (501 Bukit Timah Rd., #01–05 Cluny Court, beside the Singapore Botanic Gardens; ✆ **65/6463-9628**) and **Da Paolo la Terrazza** (44 Jalan Merah Saga, #01–56, at Chip Bee Gardens in Holland Village; ✆ **65/6476-1332**).

80 Club St. ✆ **65/6224-7081.** Reservations recommended. Main courses S$22–S$38 ($15–$26/£10–£17). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Inexpensive

Blue Ginger ★ PERANAKAN The standard belief is that Peranakan cooking is reserved for home-cooked meals, and therefore restaurants are not as plentiful—and where they do exist, are very informal. Not so at Blue Ginger, where traditional and modern mix beautifully in a style fitting for Singapore. Snuggled in a shophouse, the decor combines clean and neat lines of contemporary styling with paintings by local artists and touches of Peranakan flair. Start with *kueh pie tee,* bite-size "top hats" filled with turnip, egg, and prawn with sweet chile sauce, followed by *ayam buah keluak,* a traditional chicken dish made with a hard black Indonesian nut with sweetmeat inside. The favorite dessert here is *durian chendol,* red beans and *pandan* jelly in coconut milk with

 durian purée. Served with shaved ice on top, it smells strong—though they can make a durian-free version for guests who aren't fans of the pungent fruit.

97 Tanjong Pagar Rd. ✆ **65/6222-3928.** Reservations recommended. Small dishes S$6.50–S$35 ($4.40–$24/£2.90–£16). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–9:45pm.

Chen Fu Ji Fried Rice SINGAPOREAN With bright fluorescent lighting, the fast-food ambience is unimpressive, but the riverside views are pleasant, and after you try the fried rice, you'll never be able to eat it anywhere else again, ever. These people take loving care of each fluffy grain, frying the egg evenly throughout. The other ingredients are added abundantly, and there's no hint of oil. On the top is a crown of shredded crabmeat. The spicy chicken with cashew nuts and spring onions is delicious, and their soups are also very good. There is an additional branch, the **Chen Fu Ji Noodle House,** at Suntec City Mall, 3 Temasek Blvd. #03–020 Sky Garden (✆ **65/6334-2966**), and the true devotee can grab a bowl before boarding a plane at Changi's Terminal 2 transit lounge (✆ **65/6542-8097**).

#02–31 Riverside Point, 30 Merchant Rd. ✆ **65/6533-0166.** Reservations not accepted. Small dishes S$10–S$20 ($6.70–$13/£4.50–£9) AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6–9:45pm.

LITTLE INDIA

Inexpensive

Komala Vilas ★ SOUTH INDIAN Komala Vilas is famous with Singaporeans of every race. Don't expect the height of ambience—it's pure fast food, local style—but to sit here during a packed and noisy lunch hour is to see all walks of life come through the doors. Komala serves vegetarian dishes in southern Indian style, so there's nothing fancy about the food; it's just plain good. Order the *dosai,* a huge, thin pancake used to scoop up luscious and hearty sauces and curries. What's more, it's cheap: two samosas, *dosai,* and an assortment of stew-style sauces *(dhal)* for two is under S$10 ($6.70/£4.50) with tea. For a quick fast-food meal, this place is second to none.

76–78 Serangoon Rd. ✆ **65/6293-6980.** Reservations not accepted. Dosai S$2.20 ($1.50/£1); lunch for 2 S$10 ($6.70/£4.50). No credit cards. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Muthu's Curry Restaurant SOUTH INDIAN Muthu's is a local institution that is synonymous with one local delicacy, fish-head curry, a giant fish head floating in a huge portion of delicious curry soup, its eyes staring and teeth grinning. The cheek meat is the best part of the fish, but to be truly polite, let your friend eat the eyes. The list of accompanying dishes is long and includes crab *masala,* chicken *biryani,* and mutton curry, with fish cutlet and fried chicken sold by the piece. Go either at the start or toward the end of mealtime, so you don't get lost in the rush and can find staff with more time to help you. There's another branch in town at 3 Temasek Blvd., #B1–056, Suntec City Mall (✆ **65/6835-7707**).

138 Race Course Rd. ✆ **65/6392-1722.** Reservations recommended. Small dishes S$4–S$13 ($2.70–$8.70/£1.80–£5.90); fish-head curry from S$21 ($14/£9.50). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

ORCHARD ROAD AREA

Expensive

BLU ★★★ CONTEMPORARY Molecular gastronomy comes to town under Blu's new chef de cuisine, Kevin Cherkas. Drawing on his work at Michelin-starred restaurants El Bulli in Spain and New York's Daniel, the Canadian has created an a la carte menu from which guests can choose individually, or select six dishes for a set price. Thought-provoking

creations include foie gras with savory caramel, and "the egg came first" (a boiled egg served with onion broth, bread crumbs, and black truffle). The decor is stylish and European, with modern glass sculptures and fiber optics glowing through the glass bar and floor. Try to get a window table, since it commands an awe-inspiring view of Orchard Road from its 24th-floor perch.

Shangri-La Hotel, 22 Orange Grove Rd., 24th Floor. ✆ **65/6213-4598.** Reservations recommended. 6 courses for S$139 ($93/£63). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6:30–11pm.

Harbour Grill & Oyster Bar ★★★ CONTINENTAL Grilled seafood and U.S. prime rib are perfectly prepared and served with attentive style in this award-winning restaurant. The Continental cuisine is lighter than most, with recipes that focus on the natural freshness of their ingredients rather than on creams and fat. Caesar salad is made at your table so you can request your preferred blend of ingredients, and the oyster bar serves juicy fresh oysters from around the world. For the main course, the prime rib is the best and most requested entree, but the rack of lamb is another option worth considering—it melts in your mouth. Resident chef Alexandre Lozachmeur's specialty is a meltingly tender lamb shoulder braised with fennel and semolina cake. Guest chefs from international culinary capitals are flown in for monthly specials. The place is small and cozy, with nautical-inspired murals and a finishing kitchen in the dining room.

Hilton Singapore, Level 3, 581 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6730-3393.** Reservations recommended. Main courses S$40–S$60 ($27–$40/£18–£27). AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–2:30pm; Mon–Sat 7–10:30pm.

Li Bai ★★★ CHINESE/CANTONESE Chinese restaurants are typically unimaginative in the decor department, but not at Li Bai, which is sleekly decorated in contemporary black and red lacquer, with comfortable black leather seating. Creative chefs and guest chefs turn out a constantly evolving menu, and jade-and-silver chopsticks and white-bone china add opulent touches to their flawless meals. Go for the chef's special creations, which are always imaginative, or try the pan-fried lamb chop with black pepper sauce or gooseliver with honeyed chicken. The crab fried rice is fabulous, with generous chunks of fresh meat. Li Bai's signature XO chile sauce adds delicious spice to almost any dish. The wine list is international, with many vintages.

Sheraton Towers, Lower Lobby Level, 39 Scotts Rd. ✆ **65/6839-5623.** Reservations required. Small dishes S$18–S$60 ($12–$40/£8–£27) and up. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Mezza9 ★★ FUSION This is your best bet if your party can't agree on what to eat, as Mezza9 offers an extensive menu that includes Chinese steamed treats, Japanese, Thai, deli selections, Italian, fresh seafood, and Continental grilled specialties. Start with big and juicy raw oysters on the half shell. If you want to consider more raw seafood, the combination sashimi platter is also very fresh. Grilled meats include various cuts of beef, rack of lamb, and chicken dishes with a host of delicious sides to choose from. The enormous 400-seat restaurant has a warm atmosphere, with glowing wood and contemporary Zen accents, but service can be harried. Before you head in for dinner, grab a martini in their *très* chic martini bar.

Grand Hyatt, 10 Scotts Rd. ✆ **65/6732-1234.** www.singapore.grand.hyatt.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses S$28–S$53 ($19–$36/£13–£24). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm and 6–11:30pm.

Moderate

Chatterbox SINGAPOREAN If you'd like to try the local favorites but don't want to deal with hawker food, then Chatterbox is the place for you. This restaurant is located in the Meritus Mandarin Hotel, and while the hotel is undergoing renovations, Chatterbox

 has a prime spot on the 39th floor, so get here during 2009 to enjoy the 360-degree views of the city before it's relocated back down to the fifth floor. Their Hainanese chicken rice is highly acclaimed and the other dishes—such as *nasi lemak, laksa,* and carrot cake—are as close to the street as you can get. For a quick and tasty snack, order *tahu goreng,* deep-fried tofu in peanut chile sauce. This is also a good place to experiment with some of those really weird local drinks. *Chin chow* is the dark brown grass jelly drink; *chendol* is green jelly, red beans, palm sugar, and coconut milk; and *bandung* is pink rose syrup milk with jelly. For dessert, order the ever-favorite sago pudding, made from the hearts of the sago palm.

Mandarin Hotel, 333 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6831-6291.** Reservations recommended for lunch and dinner. Main courses S$20–S$36 ($13–$24/£9–£16). AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5pm–1am; Fri–Sat 24 hr.

Patara Fine Thai THAI Patara may say fine dining in its name, but the food here is home cooking: not too haute, not too traditional. Seafood and vegetables are the stars here. Deep-fried *garoupa* (grouper) is served in a sweet sauce with chile that can be added sparingly upon request. Curries are popular, too. The roast duck curry in red curry paste with seasonal fruits is juicy and hot. For something really different, Patara's own invention, the Thai taco, isn't exactly traditional but it is good, filled with chicken, shrimp, and sprouts. Their green curry, one of my favorites, is perhaps the best in town. Their Thai-style iced tea (which isn't on the menu, so you'll have to ask for it) is fragrant and flowery. A small selection of wines is also available. Patara has another outlet at Swissôtel The Stamford, Level 3, Stamford Road (✆ **65/6339-1488**).

#03–14 Tanglin Mall, 163 Tanglin Rd. ✆ **65/6737-0818.** Reservations recommended for lunch, required for dinner. Small dishes S$22–S$30 ($15–$20/£10–£14). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6–10pm.

Inexpensive

Ah Hoi's Kitchen SINGAPOREAN Ah Hoi's has a casual charm and an extensive menu specializing in local favorites such as fried black pepper *kuay teow* (noodles), *sambal kang kong* (a spinachlike vegetable fried with chile), and fabulous grilled seafood. The alfresco poolside pavilion location gives it a real "vacation in the Tropics" sort of feel. Also good here is the chile crab—if you can't make it out to the seafood places on the east coast of the island, it's the best alternative for tasting this local treat. Make sure you order the fresh lime juice. It's very cooling.

Traders Hotel, 1A Cuscaden Rd., 4th level. ✆ **65/6831-4373.** Reservations recommended. Small dishes S$14–S$26 ($9–$17/£6–£12). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

The Rice Table ★ MALAY/INDONESIAN/DUTCH Indonesian Dutch *rijsttafel,* meaning "rice table," is a service of many small dishes (up to almost 20) with rice. Traditionally, each dish would be brought to diners by beautiful ladies in pompous style. Here, busy waitstaff brings all the dishes out and places them in front of you—feast on favorite Indo-Malay wonders such as beef *rendang,* chicken satay, *otak otak,* and *sotong assam* (squid) for a very reasonable price. It's an enormous amount of food and everything is terrific. You will pay extra for your drinks and desserts.

International Bldg., 360 Orchard Rd., #02–09/10. ✆ **65/6835-3783.** Reservations not necessary. Lunch set S$15 ($10/£7); dinner set S$24 ($16/£11). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:15pm and 6–9:15pm.

A LITTLE FARTHER OUT

Many travelers will choose to eat in town for convenience, and although there's plenty of great dining in the more central areas, there are some other really fantastic dining finds if you're willing to hop in a cab for 10 or 15 minutes. These places are worth the trip—for a

chance to dine along the water at UDMC or go for superior seafood at Long Beach Seafood Restaurant. And don't worry about finding your way back: Most places always have cabs milling about. If not, restaurant staff will help you call a taxi.

Expensive

Halia ★ CONTINENTAL/FUSION Most notable for its location within the aromatic ginger garden of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, you really need to come to Halia for a daytime meal, either a weekend breakfast buffet, relaxing lunch, or weekday high tea, if you want to enjoy the lush greenery of the surroundings. Cuisine is contemporary fare, with ginger permeating quite a few of the recipes—*halia* being "ginger" in Malay. The specialty of the house is the chunks of seafood stewed in Asian flavors of chile and lemon grass served over a bed of *papardelle* pasta. To get there, ask the taxi driver to take you along Tyersall Avenue and look for the halia signboard at the Tyersall Gate near the Ginger Garden.

1 Cluny Rd., in the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Tyersall Gate. ✆ **65/6476-6711.** Reservations recommended. Main courses S$26–S$43 ($17–$29/£12–£19); breakfast buffet S$18 ($12/£8). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm; high tea 3–5pm; dinner 6:30–10:15pm; breakfast/brunch Sat–Sun 9am–3:30pm.

Moderate

Long Beach Seafood Restaurant SEAFOOD They really pack 'em in at this place. Tables are crammed together in what resembles a big indoor pavilion, complete with festive lights and the sounds of mighty feasting. This is one of the best places for fresh seafood of all kinds: *garoupa* (grouper), sea bass, marble goby, kingfish, and other creatures of the sea from prawns to crayfish. The house specialty is the pepper crab, chopped and deliciously smothered in a thick concoction of black pepper and soy. Huge chunks of crayfish are also tasty in the black-pepper sauce and can be served in variations such as barbecue, sambal, steamed with garlic, or in a bean sauce. Don't forget to order buns so you can sop up the sauce. You can also get vegetable, chicken, beef, or venison dishes, or choose from their selection of local favorites. Long Beach now has several branches, including at Dempsey Hill, 25 Dempsey Rd. opposite the Botanic Gardens (✆ **65/6323-2222**).

1018 East Coast Pkwy. ✆ **65/6445-8833.** Reservations recommended. Seafood is sold by weight according to seasonal prices. Most nonseafood dishes S$11–S$22 ($7–$15/£5–£10). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm; Sun–Fri 5pm–12:15am; Sat 5pm–1:15am.

Original Sin ★ MEDITERRANEAN/VEGETARIAN This cozy place is a perennial favorite with Singapore's expatriate population. Located in Holland Village, Singapore's expat enclave, the restaurant is close to shopping, pubs, and numerous other dining choices that cater to this international group. This particular restaurant is a favorite, with generous portions of favorites such as baba ghanouj, *tzatziki,* and hummus served with olives, feta, and pita bread, plus moussaka and risotto. The pizzas, which are loaded with interesting Middle Eastern toppings, are very popular. The owners also run two other properties of equal quality and popularity in Chip Bee Gardens, Italian restaurants **Michelangelo's,** Block 44, Jalan Merah Saga #01–60 (✆ **65/6475-9069**) and **Sistina,** Block 44, Jalan Merah Saga #01–58 (✆ **65/6476-7782**). All of these restaurants have a casual bistro-style atmosphere inside and sidewalk dining outside.

Block 43 Jalan Merah Saga #01–62, Chip Bee Gardens, Holland Village. ✆ **65/6475-5605.** Reservations recommended. Main courses S$22–S$28 ($15–$19/£10–£13). AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 11:30am–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm; Mon 6–10:30pm.

UDMC Seafood Centre ★★ SEAFOOD Eight seafood restaurants are lined side by side in 2 blocks, their fronts open to the view of the sea outside. UDMC is a fantastic way to eat seafood Singapore style, in the open air, in restaurants that are more like grand stalls than anything else. Eat the famous local chile crab and pepper crab here, along with all sorts of squid, fish, and scallop dishes. Noodle dishes are also available, as are vegetable dishes and other meats. But the seafood is the thing to come for. Of the eight restaurants, there's no saying which is the best, as everyone seems to have his own opinions about this one or that one (we like Jumbo at the far eastern end of the row; call ✆ **65/6442-3435** for reservations, which are recommended for weekends). Have a nice stroll along the walkway and gaze out to the water while you decide which one to go for.

Block 1202 East Coast Pkwy. No phone. Seafood dishes are charged by weight, with dishes starting at around S$14 ($9/£6). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 5pm–midnight.

Inexpensive

Samy's Curry Restaurant ★ SOUTH INDIAN There are many places in Singapore to get good southern Indian banana leaf, but none quite as unique as Samy's out on Dempsey Road. Samy's is situated in a huge, high-ceilinged, open-air hall, with shutters thrown back and fans whirring above. Wash your hands at the back and have a seat, and soon someone will slap a banana leaf place mat in front of you. A blob of white rice will be placed in the center, and then buckets of vegetables, chicken, mutton, fish, prawn, and you-name-it will be brought out, swimming in the richest and spiciest curries to ever pass your lips. Take a peek in each bucket, nod your head yes when you see one you like, and a scoop will be dumped onto your banana leaf. Eat with your right hand or with a fork and spoon. When you're done, wipe the sweat from your brow, fold the banana leaf away from you, and place your tableware on top. Samy's serves no alcohol, but the fresh lime juice is nice and cooling, and *lassi,* the flavored yogurt drink, helps to counteract the spiciness.

Block 25 Dempsey Rd., Civil Service Club. ✆ **65/6472-2080.** Reservations not accepted. Sold by the scoop or piece, S80¢–S$4 (50¢–$2.70/40p–£1.80). V. Daily 11am–3pm and 6–10pm.

HAWKER CENTERS

Hawker centers—large groupings of informal open-air food stalls—were Singapore's answer to fast and cheap food in the days before McDonald's and are still the best way to sample every kind of Singaporean cuisine. The traditional hawker center is an outdoor venue, usually under cover with fans whirring above, and individual stalls each specializing in different dishes. In between rows of cooking stalls, tables and stools offer open seating for diners.

Each center has an array of food offerings, with most dishes costing between S$3.50 and S$7 ($2.30–$4.70/£1.60–£3.20). You'll find traditional dishes such as ***char kway teow,*** flat rice noodles fried with seafood; **fish ball noodle soup,** with balls made from pounded fish and rice flour; **clay pot chicken rice,** chicken and mushrooms baked with rice and fragrant soy sauce; ***bak kut teh,*** pork ribs stewed with Chinese herbs; **Hainanese chicken rice,** soft chicken over rice prepared in rich chicken stock; ***laksa,*** seafood and rice noodles in a spicy coconut chile soup; ***popiah,*** turnip, egg, pork, prawn, and sweet chile sauce wrapped in a thin skin; ***rojak,*** fried dough, tofu, cucumber, pineapple, and whatever the chef has handy, mixed with a sauce made from peanuts and fermented shrimp paste; plus many, many more Chinese, Malay, and Indian specialties. You'll also find hot and cold drink stalls and usually a stall selling fresh fruits and fruit juices.

If you want to become a real Singapore foodie, buy a copy of *Makansutra* by K. F. Seetoh (Makansutra Publishing) at any bookstore. Seetoh is the local guru of hawker foods and has sniffed out the tastiest, most authentic local delicacies you can imagine.

Within the city limits, most traditional-style hawker centers have been closed down, but you can still find a few. Singapore's most famous, or notorious, hawker center is **Newton Circus Hawker Center,** a 24-hour center near the Newton MRT stop and a tour-bus darling; beware of gouging, especially when ordering seafood dishes, which are sold by the kilo.

For local-style hawker centers, in Chinatown you can find stalls at the **Maxwell Road Food Centre** at the corner of Maxwell and South Bridge roads, or you can try **Lau Pa Sat** at the corner of Raffles Way and Boon Tat Street. A new food attraction, a row of stalls along Smith Street called **Food Alley** was conceived by the STB. Rumor has it these guys are having a hard time making a living selling local food to the very touristy crowd that passes down this street in the evenings. In the Historic District, try the **small center next to Allson Hotel** on Victoria Street, or **Makansutra,** next to the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay. In Little India, **Tekka Market** is under construction, but nearby on Race Course Road the hawkers have set up under a temporary structure.

When you eat at a hawker center, the first thing to do is claim a seat at a table (local trick: If you put a tissue packet down on the table in front of your seat, people will understand it's reserved). Remember the number on your table so that when you order from each stall, you can let them know where you're seated. They will deliver your food to the table, and you must pay upon delivery. Change will be provided. When you are finished, there's no need to clear your dishes; it will be taken care of for you.

The modern version of the hawker center is the **food court.** Similar to hawker centers, food courts are air-conditioned spaces inside shopping malls and public buildings. They also have individual stalls offering a variety of foods and tables with free seating. Generally, food courts offer a more "fast-food," less authentic version of local cuisine, but you also get greater variety—many food courts have a stall that sells Western burgers and fish and chips, and stalls with Japanese *udon* or Korean barbecue. Food courts also differ in that they're self-service. When you approach the stall, you take a tray, pay when you order, then carry the food yourself to a table, similar to cafeteria style. When you finish, you are not expected to clear your tray.

Food courts are everywhere within the city, most of them operated by popular chains like **Food Junction, Kopitiam,** and **Banquet.** You'll find them in shopping malls and public buildings, most likely on the top floor or in the basement. Your hotel's concierge will be able to point you to the nearest food court.

6 WHAT TO SEE & DO

The city's many old buildings and well-presented museum displays bring history to life. Chinese and Hindu temples and Muslim mosques welcome curious observers to discover their culture as they play out their daily activities, and the country's natural parks make the great outdoors easily accessible from even the most urban neighborhood. Singapore also has a multitude of planned attractions for visitors and locals alike. Theme parks devoted to cultural heritage, sporting fun, and even kitsch amusement pop up all over the island.

Urban Singapore Attractions

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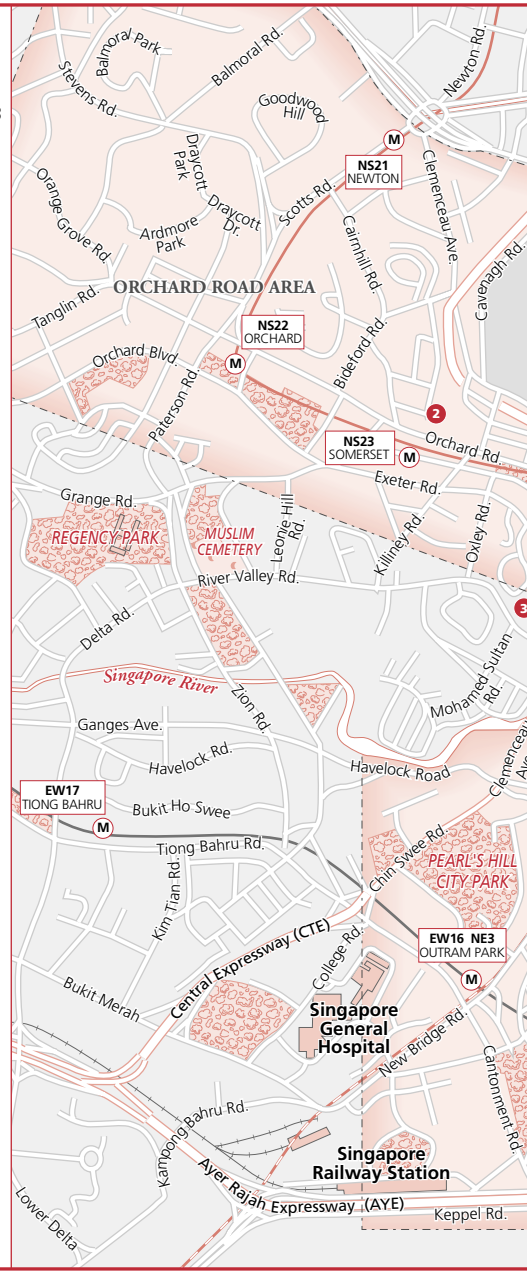
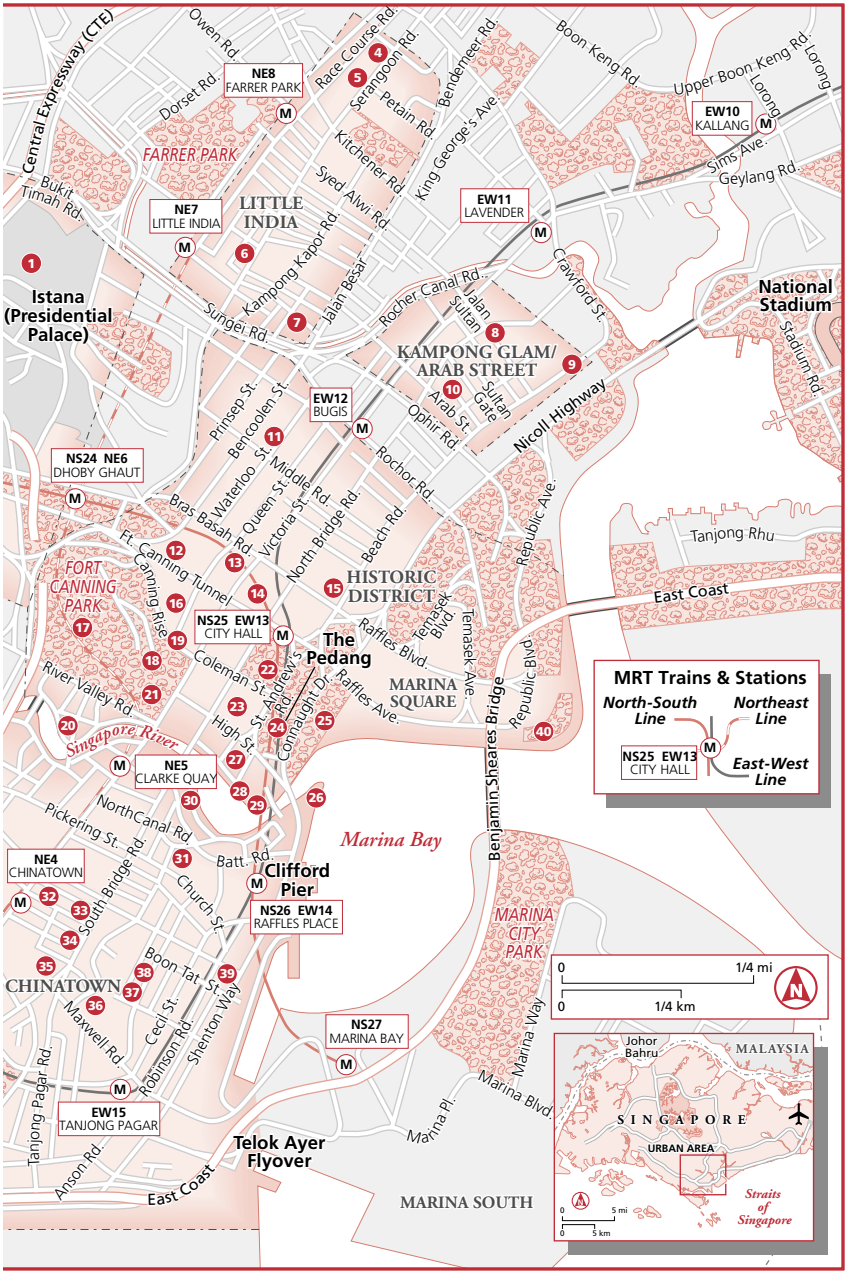
ORCHARD ROAD AREA
The Istana and Sri Temasek **1**
Peranakan Place **2**




Central Expressway (CTE)
Owen Rd.
Dorset Rd.
NE8 FARRER PARK
Race Course Rd.
Serangoon Rd.
Bendemeer Rd.
Boon Keng Rd.
Upper Boon Keng Rd.
Lorong
Lorong
EW10 KALLANG
Sims Ave.
Geylang Rd.
FARRER PARK
Bukit Timah Rd.
Petain Rd.
Kitchener Rd.
King George's Ave.
Syed Alwi Rd.
NE7 LITTLE INDIA
LITTLE INDIA
EW11 LAVENDER
Crawford St.
Kampong Kapor Rd.
Jalan Besar
Rochor Canal Rd.
Jalan Sultan
National Stadium
Stadium Rd.
Istana (Presidential Palace)
Sungei Rd.
KAMPONG GLAM/ ARAB STREET
Arab St.
Sultan Gate
Nicoll Highway
Prinsep St.
Bencoolen St.
EW12 BUGIS
Ophir Rd.
Waterloo St.
Middle Rd.
Queen St.
Victoria St.
Rochor Rd.
NS24 NE6 DHOBY GHAUT
Bras Basah Rd.
North Bridge Rd.
Beach Rd.
Republic Ave.
Tanjong Rhu
Ft. Canning Tunnel
Canning Rise
FORT CANNING PARK
HISTORIC DISTRICT
East Coast
NS25 EW13 CITY HALL
The Padang
Raffles Blvd.
Temasek Blvd.
Temasek Ave.
Coleman St.
St. Andrew's Rd.
MARINA SQUARE
River Valley Rd.
Connaught Dr.
Raffles Ave.
Republic Blvd.
Singapore River
High St.
NE5 CLARKE QUAY
North Canal Rd.
Pickering St.
Benjamin Sheares Bridge
Marina Bay
NE4 CHINATOWN
Batt. Rd.
Clifford Pier
South Bridge Rd.
Church St.
NS26 EW14 RAFFLES PLACE
MARINA CITY PARK
CHINATOWN
Boon Tat St.
Cecil St.
Maxwell Rd.
Shenton Way
Robinson Rd.
NS27 MARINA BAY
Marina Way
Marina Blvd.
Tanjong Pagar Rd.
EW15 TANJONG PAGAR
Marina Pl.
Telok Ayer Flyover
Anson Rd.
East Coast
MARINA SOUTH
MRT Trains & Stations
North-South Line
Northeast Line
NS25 EW13 CITY HALL
East-West Line
0 1/4 mi
0 1/4 km
Johor Bahru
MALAYSIA
SINGAPORE
URBAN AREA
Straits of Singapore
0 5 mi
0 5 km

The places of worship listed in this section are open to the public and free of entrance charges. Expect temples to be open from sunup to sundown. Visiting hours are not specific to the hour, but unless it's a holiday (when hours may be extended), you can expect these places to be open during daylight hours.

HISTORIC DISTRICT

Armenian Church ★ Of all colonial buildings, the Armenian Church (formally called the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator) is one of the most beautiful examples of early architectural style here. Designed by George Coleman, one of Singapore's most prolific and talented architects, it is his finest work. Although there were many alterations in the last century, the main style of the structure still dominates. The round congregation hall is powerful in its simplicity, its long louvered windows letting in cooling breezes while keeping out the imposing sunlight. Roman Doric columns support symmetrical porticos that protect the structure from rain. All in all, it's a wonderful achievement of combined European eclectic tastes and tropical necessity.

The first permanent Christian church in Singapore, it was funded primarily by the Armenian community, which was at one time quite powerful. Today, few Singaporeans can trace their heritage back to this influential group of immigrants. The church was consecrated in 1836, and the last appointed priest serving the parish retired in 1936. Although regular Armenian services are no longer held, other religious organizations make use of the church from time to time. The cemetery in the back of the church is the burial site of many prominent Armenians.

60 Hill St., across from the Grand Plaza Park Hotel. ✆ **65/6334-0141.** Free admission. 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Asian Civilisations Museum ★★★ If you only have time for one museum, this should be it. This fantastic and well-executed exhibit of Southeast Asian culture highlights the history of the region and explores the Chinese, South Indian, and Islamic heritage that helped to shape regional cultures here. Well-planned galleries showcase fine arts, furniture, porcelain, jade, and other relics with excellent descriptions.

The Empress Place Building that houses the museum stood as a symbol of British colonial authority as sea travelers entered the Singapore River. The stately building housed almost the entire government bureaucracy around the year 1905 and was a government office until the 1980s, housing the Registry of Births and Deaths and the Citizenship Registry.

Don't forget to stop at the Museum Shop (✆ **65/6336-9050**) to browse exquisite ethnic crafts of the region. Also, check out the museum's website to find out more about their free lecture series.

1 Empress Place. ✆ **65/6332-7798.** www.acm.org.sg. Adults S$5 ($3.40/£2.30), children and seniors S$2.50 ($1.70/£1.10); free Fri 7–9pm, Mon 1–7pm, Tues–Sun 9am–7pm (extended hours Fri until 9pm). Free guided tours in English Mon 2pm, Tues–Fri 11am and 2pm, with an extra tour on weekends at 3:30pm. 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Cathedral of the Good Shepherd This cathedral was Singapore's first permanent Catholic church. Built in the 1840s, it unified many elements of a fractured parish. In the early days of the colony, the Portuguese Mission thought itself the fount of the Holy Roman Empire's presence on the island, and so the French bishop was reduced to holding services at the home of a Mr. McSwiney on Bras Basah Road, a dissenting Portuguese priest held for that a certain Dr. d'Ameida's residence, and the Spanish priest was so reduced that we don't even know where he held his services. These folks were none too

pleased with their makeshift houses of worship and so banded together to establish their own cathedral—the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. Designed in a Latin cross pattern, much of its architecture is reminiscent of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and St. Paul's in Covent Garden. The archbishop's residence, in contrast, is a simple two-story bungalow with enclosed verandas and a portico. Also on the grounds are the resident's quarters and the priests' residence, the latter more ornate in design, with elaborate plaster work.

4 Queen St. (at the corner of Queen St. and Bras Basah Rd.). ✆ **65/6337-2036.** Free admission. Open to the public during the day. 5-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

CHIJMES (Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus) As you enter this bustling enclave of retail shops, restaurants, and nightspots, it's difficult to imagine this was once a convent that, at its founding in 1854, consisted of a lone, simply constructed bungalow. After decades of buildings and add-ons, this collection of perfectly blended structures—a school, a private residence, an orphanage, a stunning Gothic chapel, and many others—was enclosed within walls, forming peaceful courtyards and open spaces encompassing an entire city block. Legend has it the small door on the corner of Bras Basah and Victoria streets welcomed hundreds of orphan babies, girl children who just appeared on the stoop each morning, either born during inauspicious years or to poor families. In late 1983, the convent relocated to the suburbs, and some of the block was leveled to make way for the MRT Headquarters. Thankfully, most of the block survived and the Singapore government, in planning the renovation of this desirable piece of real estate, wisely kept the integrity of the architecture. For an evening out, the atmosphere at CHIJMES is exquisitely romantic.

A note on the name: CHIJMES is pronounced "Chimes"; the "Chij," as noted, stands for Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, and the "mes" was just added on so they could pronounce it "Chimes."

30 Victoria St. ✆ **65/6336-1818.** Free admission. 5-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

City Hall (Municipal Building) During the Japanese occupation, City Hall was a major headquarters, and it was here in 1945 that Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten accepted the Japanese surrender. In 1951, the Royal Proclamation from King George VI was read here declaring that Singapore would henceforth be known as a city. Fourteen years later, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced to its citizens that Singapore would henceforth be called an independent republic.

City Hall, along with the Supreme Court, was judiciously sited to take full advantage of its prime location. Magnificent Corinthian columns march across the front of the symmetrically designed building, while inside, two courtyards lend an ambience of informality to other wise official surroundings. For all its magnificence and historical fame, however, its architect, F. D. Meadows, relied too heavily on European influence. The many windows afford no protection from the sun, and the entrance leaves pedestrians unsheltered from the elements. In defining the very nobility of the Singapore government, it appears the Singaporean climate wasn't taken into consideration.

From 2013, City Hall and the Supreme Court are slated to become the new National Art Gallery, giving much-needed space to display the nation's collection of Southeast Asian art and providing a platform for major international exhibitions. Though not open to the public, the buildings will continue to be used occasionally for special events until conversion work begins in 2010.

3 St. Andrew's Rd., across from the Padang. Entrance is not permitted. 5-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Fort Canning Park These days, Fort Canning Park is known for great views over Singapore, but in days past it served as the site of Raffles's home and the island's first botanic garden. Its history goes back even farther, though: Excavations have unearthed ancient brick foundations and artifacts that give credence to the island natives' belief that their royal ancestors lived and were buried on the site. Atop the hill, a mysterious *keramat,* or sacred grave, marks what is believed to be the burial site of Iskander Shah (also known as Parameswara), the Palembang ruler who came to Singapore in the late 1300s before settling in Melaka.

From the start Raffles chose this hill to build his home (at the site of the present-day lookout point), which later became a residence for Singapore's diplomats and governors. In 1860, the house was torn down to make way for Fort Canning, which was built to quell British fears of invasion but instead quickly became the laughingstock of the island. The location was ideal for spotting invaders from the sea, but defending Singapore? Not likely. The cannons' range was such that their shells couldn't possibly have made it all the way out to an attacking ship—instead, most of the town below would have been destroyed. In 1907, the fort was demolished for a reservoir. Today, the only reminders of the old fort are some of the walls and the Fort Gate, a deep stone structure. Behind its huge wooden door you'll find a narrow staircase that leads to the roof.

Raffles also chose this as the location for the first botanic garden on the island, with ambitious plans to develop commercial crops, particularly spices. The garden was short-lived due to lack of funding; however, the park still has a pretty interesting selection of plants and trees, including the cotton tree, whose pods open to reveal fluffy white "cotton" that was commonly used for stuffing pillows and mattresses. In many parts, these plants are well marked along the pathways. Also look for the ASEAN sculpture garden.

Fort Canning was also the site of a **European cemetery.** To make improvements in the park, the graves were exhumed and the stones placed within the walls surrounding the outdoor performance field that slopes from the Music and Drama Society building. Inside the park, the **Battle Box** is an old World War II bunker that displays in wax dioramas and a multimedia show the surrender of Singapore. It's open daily from 10am to 6pm; adults S$8 ($5.40/£3.60), children S$5 ($3.40/£2.30); ✆ **65/6333-0510.**

The National Parks Board gives free guided tours of the park, but not the Battle Box, every last Saturday of the month at 4pm; call ✆ **65/6332-1302** to register.

51 Canning Rise. ✆ **65/6332-1302.** www.nparks.gov.sg. Free admission. Major entrances are from behind the Hill St. Bldg., Percival Rd. (Drama Centre), National Library Carpark, and Canning Walk (behind Park Mall). Dhoby Ghaut or City Hall MRT.

Hill Street Building Originally built to house the British Police Force, the building was sited directly across from Chinatown for easy access to quell the frequent gang fights. Later it became home to the National Archives, and it is believed that inquisitions and torture were carried out in the basement during the Japanese occupation. Former National Archives employees have claimed to have seen ghosts of tortured souls sitting at their desks.

Today, this colorful building houses the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA), and the National Arts Council. Inside the courtyard, check out ARTrium@MICA, with galleries displaying Singaporean, Southeast Asian, and European fine arts. It's air-conditioned.

140 Hill St. at the corner of River Valley Rd., on Fort Canning Park. ✆ **65/6837-9527.** www.artriumatmica.com. Free admission. 5-min. walk from Clarke Quay MRT.

Kuan Yin Thong Hood Cho Temple It's said that whatever you wish for within the walls of Kuan Yin Temple comes true. It must work, as there's a steady stream of people on auspicious days of the Chinese calendar. The procedure is simple (watch others to catch on): Wear shoes easily slipped off before entering the temple and join the queue. When it is your turn, light several joss sticks, bow with them, and make a wish before placing them in the urn provided. Pick up the cylindrical container filled with wooden sticks and shake it until one stick falls out—each stick has a number. Give this number to the interpretation office, and they will hand you a piece of paper with verses in Mandarin and English. This will tell you your general fortune, plus a clue as to whether your wish will come true. (For a small fee, interpreters outside can help with the translation.) Now for the payback: If your wish comes true, you're supposed to return to the temple and offer fruits and flowers to say thanks (oranges, pears, and apples are a thoughtful choice, and jasmine petals are especially nice). To be on the safe side, bring the goods with you when you make your wish.

Waterloo St., about 1 1/2 blocks from Bras Basah Rd. Free admission. Open to the public during the day. 15-min. walk from Bugis MRT.

National Museum of Singapore ★★★ This beautiful 120-year-old building, the former Singapore History Museum, has not only been restored, but has been expanded to more than twice its original size by adding a striking modernist wing to the rear of the building. Cleverly, the new wing is invisible from the front. An ingenious glass-ceilinged walkway connects the old and new wings and provides a perfect point to view the magnificent Victorian dome with its stained-glass panels and zinc fishtail tiles. The large History Gallery, based in the new wing, tells the story of Singapore from two points of view: from a historian's perspective and from the "man on the street," accompanied by state-of-the-art multimedia exhibits designed to bring history to life and make it accessible for all visitors. You decide which story you'd like to hear, then choose the corresponding audio headset that will guide you through the exhibit. The four Living Galleries are on the second floor of the old wing and show objects and elements of everyday Singaporean life. The museum conducts free guided tours in English Monday through Friday at 11am and 2pm, and on Saturday and Sunday at 11:30am and 3:30pm; the tour takes 1 to 1 1/2 hours. The building itself is a mix of colonial and contemporary architecture; a free tour that focuses just on the architecture is offered Friday through Sunday at 3:30pm.

93 Stamford Rd. ✆ **65/6332-3659.** www.nationalmuseum.sg. Adults S$10 ($6.70/£4.50), children and seniors S$5 ($3.40/£2.30); free admission to the Living Galleries daily 6–8pm. History Gallery daily 10am–6pm; Living Galleries daily 10am–8pm. 5-min. walk from Dhoby Ghaut or City Hall MRT.

Old Parliament House The Old Parliament House is probably Singapore's oldest surviving structure, even though it has been renovated so many times it no longer looks the way it was originally constructed. It was designed as a home for John Argyle Maxwell, a Scottish merchant, but he never moved in. In 1822, Raffles returned to Singapore and was furious to find a residence being built on ground he'd allocated for government use. So the government took over Maxwell's house for its court and other offices. In 1939, when the new Supreme Court was completed, the judiciary moved into Maxwell's House (as it became officially known); then, in 1953, following a major renovation, the small structure was renamed Parliament House and was turned over to the legislature.

The original house was designed by architect George D. Coleman, who had helped Raffles with his Town Plan of 1822. Coleman's design was in the English neo-Palladian

style. Simple and well suited to the Tropics, this style was popular at the time with Calcutta merchants. Major alterations have left very little behind of Coleman's design, replacing it with an eclectic French classical style, but some of his work survives.

Today, the building has been transformed once again—the Arts House at the Old Parliament has been lovingly restored, with spaces for visual and performance arts plus special cultural events, a small gallery, and a couple of highbrow eateries.

1 Old Parliament Lane, at the south end of the Padang, next to the Supreme Court. ✆ **65/6332-6900.** www.theartshouse.com.sg. Mon–Fri 10am–8pm; Sat 11am–8pm. Free admission, guided tour S$8 ($5.40/£3.60); extra charge for tickets to events. 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

The Padang This large field has witnessed its share of historical events. Bordered on one end by the Singapore Recreation Club and on the other end by the Singapore Cricket Club, and flanked by City Hall, the area was once known as Raffles Plain. Upon Raffles's return to the island in 1822, he was angry that resident Farquhar had allowed merchants to move private residences into the prime area he had originally intended for government buildings. All building permits were rescinded, and the Padang became the official center point for the government quarters, around which the Esplanade and City Hall were built.

Today, the Padang is mainly used for public and sporting events—pleasant activities—but in the 1940s it felt more forlorn footsteps when the invading Japanese forced the entire European community onto the field. There they waited while the occupation officers dickered over a suitable location for the "conquered." They ordered all British, Australian, and Allied troops as well as European prisoners on the 22km (14-mile) march to Changi.

St. Andrew's Rd. and Connaught Dr. Free admission. 5-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Peranakan Museum This small branch of the Asian Civilisations Museum (see above) illuminates the fascinating culture of the Peranakans, people born of intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and locally born Malays. The result is a rich and fascinating blend of traditions, cuisine, and decorative influences. Look out for the incredibly beautiful carved-teak wedding furniture and the distinctive porcelain decorated in typical Peranakan colors of pink, blue, green, and yellow. The clothing is vivid yet delicate, featuring intricate embroidery and beading. The collection is nicely laid out in a lovely building that was the former Tao Nan School, which dates from 1910.

39 Armenian St. ✆ **65/6332-7591.** www.peranakanmuseum.sg. Adults S$6 ($4/£2.70), children and seniors S$3 ($2/£1.40); free Fri 7–9pm. Mon 1–7pm; Tues–Sun 9:30am–7pm (extended hours Fri 9:30am–9pm). 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Raffles Hotel ★★ Built in 1887 to accommodate the increasing upper-class trade, Raffles Hotel was originally only a couple of bungalows with 10 rooms, but the view of the sea was perfection. The owners, Armenian brothers named Sarkies, already had a couple of prosperous hotels in Southeast Asia (the Eastern & Oriental in Penang and the Strand in Rangoon) and were well versed in the business. It wasn't long before they added a pair of wings and completed the main building—and reading rooms, verandas, dining rooms, a grand lobby, the Bar and Billiards Room, a ballroom, and a string of shops. By 1899, electricity was turning the cooling fans and providing the pleasing glow of comfort.

As it made its madcap dash through the '20s, the hotel was the place to see and be seen. Vacancies were unheard of. Hungry Singaporeans and guests from other hotels, eager for a glimpse of the fabulous dining room, were turned away for lack of reservations. The crowded ballroom was jumping every night of the week. During this time

Raffles's guest book included famous authors like Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Noël Coward. These were indeed the glory years, but the lovely glimmer from the chandeliers soon faded with the stark arrival of the Great Depression. Raffles managed to limp through that dark time—and, darker still, through the Japanese occupation—and later pull back from the brink of bankruptcy to undergo modernization in the '50s. But fresher, brighter, more opulent hotels were taking root on Orchard Road, pushing the "grand old lady" to the back seat.

In the 1990s Raffles was brought back to its former glory, restored and sensitively expanded over the course of a 3-year, multimillion-dollar project. History-minded renovators selected 1915 as a benchmark and, with a few changes here and there, faithfully restored the hotel to that era's magnificence and splendor. Today, the hotel's restaurants and nightlife draw thousands of visitors daily to its open lobby, its theater playhouse, the Raffles Hotel Museum, and exclusive boutiques. Its 15 restaurants and bars—especially the Tiffin Room, Raffles Grill, and Doc Cheng's—are a wonder, as is its famous Bar and Billiards Room and Long Bar. If you're arriving by taxi, ask the driver to take you to the front door of the hotel, where you'll be met by Raffles's fabulous Sikh doormen.

1 Beach Rd. ✆ **65/6337-1886.** City Hall MRT.

Raffles Landing Site The polymarble statue at this site was unveiled in 1972. It was made from plaster casts of the original 1887 figure located in front of the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall (see below) and stands on what is believed to be the site where Sir Stamford Raffles landed on January 29, 1819.

North Boat Quay. Free admission. 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

St. Andrew's Cathedral Designed by George Coleman; erected on a site selected by Sir Stamford Raffles himself; named for the patron saint of Scotland, St. Andrew; and primarily funded by Singapore's Scottish community, the first St. Andrew's was the colonials' Anglican Church. Completed toward the end of the 1830s, its tower and spire were added several years later to accord the edifice more stature. By 1852, because of massive damage sustained from lightning strikes, the cathedral was deemed unsafe and torn down. The cathedral that now stands on the site was completed in 1860. Of English Gothic Revival design, the cathedral is one of the few standing churches of this style in the region. The spire resembles the steeple of Salisbury Cathedral—another tribute from the colonials to Mother England. Not only English residents but Christian Chinese, Indians, continental Europeans, and Malays consider this to be their center of worship.

The plasterwork of St. Andrew's inside walls used a material called Madras *chunam,* a combination of shell lime (without the sand) mixed with egg whites and coarse sugar or jaggery.

The original church bell was presented to the cathedral by Maria Revere Balestier, the daughter of famed American patriot Paul Revere. The bell is now on display in the National Museum of Singapore.

11 St. Andrew's Rd., across from the Padang. ✆ **65/6337-6104.** Free admission. Open during daylight hours. City Hall MRT.

Singapore Art Museum ★ The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) opened in 1996 to house an impressive collection of more than 6,500 pieces of art and sculpture, most of it by Singaporean and Malay artists. Limited space requires the curators to display only a small number at a time, but these are incorporated in interesting exhibits to illustrate particular artistic styles, social themes, or historical concepts. A large collection of Southeast

Asian pieces rotates regularly, as well as visiting international exhibits. Besides the main halls, the museum offers up a gift shop with fine souvenir ideas, a cafe, a conservation laboratory, an auditorium, and the E-mage Gallery, where multimedia presentations include not only the museum's own acquisitions but other works from public and private collections in the region as well. A new wing, 8Q, in neighboring Queen Street, opened in 2008 to highlight the work of living Asian artists and experimental art forms. It also contains a Children's Gallery with a hands-on approach. Once a Catholic boys' school established in 1852, SAM has retained some visible reminders of its former occupants: Above the front door of the main building you can still see inscribed "St. Joseph's Institution," and a bronze-toned, cast-iron statue of St. John Baptist de la Salle with two children stands in its original place.

71 Bras Basah Rd. ✆ **65/6332-3222.** www.singart.com. Adults S$5 ($3.40/£2.30), children and seniors S$2.50 ($1.70/£1.10), free admission Fri 6–9pm. Sat–Thurs 10am–7pm; Fri 10am–9pm. Free guided tours in English Mon 2pm, Tues–Thurs 11am and 2pm, with additional tours on Fri at 7pm, Sat–Sun at 3:30pm. 10-min. walk from City Hall and Dhoby Ghaut MRT.

Singapore Flyer ★★★ The new must-have accessory for the world's most ambitious cities is a giant observation wheel, and Singapore's just built itself the worlds largest, standing proudly at Marina Bay. But in a typically Singaporean cultural twist, just 6 months after the multimillion-dollar wheel started to revolve in 2008, it was stopped and yet more millions were spent on reversing the turning direction. Why? Because feng shui masters observed that the Flyer was turning away from the financial center and taking Singapore's riches with it. The U-turn was a good move; the geomancers are happy and passengers now get to appreciate views that stretch up to 45km (28 miles) to Malaysia and Indonesia, before enjoying breathtaking views of the city skyline and the harbor on the way back down—definitely the highlight of the trip. It takes about 30 minutes to complete the circle, and the glass cabins are large enough to stroll around in while the world moves leisurely past.

30 Raffles Ave. ✆ **65/6333-3311.** www.singaporeflyer.com. Adults S$30 ($20/£13), children S$21 ($14/£9.30). Daily 8:30am–10:30pm. Bus: 111, 106, or 133 from Raffles Hotel to Temasek Ave. Free shuttle buses every half-hour from St. Andrew's Cathedral, 10am–11pm. MRT.

Singapore Philatelic Museum This building, constructed in 1895 to house the Methodist Book Room, underwent a S$7-million ($4.5-million/£2.3-million) restoration to become the Philatelic Museum in 1995. Exhibits include a fine collection of old stamps issued to commemorate historically important events, first-day covers, antique printing plates, postal service memorabilia, and private collections. Visitors can trace the development of a stamp from idea to the finished sheet, and you can even add your own picture to your holiday postcards and mail them from the last operational colonial postbox in Singapore. Special-edition folios featuring indigenous trees, flowers, and wildlife make pretty and compact souvenirs. Free guided tours are available upon request.

23B Coleman St. ✆ **65/6337-3888.** www.spm.org.sg. Adults S$5 ($3.40/£2.30), children and seniors S$4 ($2.70/£1.80). Mon 1–7pm; Tues–Sun 9am–7pm. 10-min. walk from Clarke Quay MRT.

Statue of Raffles This sculpture of Sir Stamford Raffles was erected on the Padang in 1887 and moved to its present position after getting in the way of one too many cricket matches. During the Japanese occupation, the statue was placed in the Singapore History Museum (then the Raffles Museum) and was replaced here in 1945. The local joke is that Raffles's arm is outstretched to the Bank of China building, and his pockets are empty. (Translation: In terms of wealth in Singapore, it's Chinese 1, Brits 0.)

Behind the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, 9 Empress Place. Free admission. 10-min. walk from City Hall, Clarke Quay, and Raffles Place MRT.

Supreme Court The Supreme Court stands on the site of the old Hotel de L'Europe, a rival of Raffles Hotel until it went bankrupt in the 1930s. The court's structure, a classical style favored for official buildings the world over, was completed in 1939. With its spare adornment and architectural simplicity, the edifice has a no-nonsense, utilitarian attitude, and the sculptures across the front, executed by the Italian sculptor Cavaliere Rodolpho Nolli, echo what transpires within. Justice is the most breathtaking, standing 2.7m (9 ft.) high and weighing almost 4 tons. Kneeling on either side of her are representations of Supplication and Thankfulness. To the far left are Deceit and Violence. To the far right, a bull represents Prosperity and two children hold wheat, to depict Abundance.

Two and a half million bricks were used in building this structure, but take a moment to note the stonework: It's fake. Really a gypsum type of plaster, it was applied by Chinese plasterers who molded it to give the appearance of granite. A dome, a copy of the one at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, covers an interior courtyard, which is surrounded by the four major portions of the Supreme Court building.

There is currently no public access to the Old Supreme Court building, but visitors are permitted to attend court hearings, which are held in the modern court building, provided appropriate dress and etiquette codes are observed.

1 St. Andrew's Rd., across from the Padang. ✆ **65/6336-0644.** Free admission. Mon–Fri 8:30am–5pm; Sat 8:30am–1pm. 10-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall Designed by colonial engineer John Bennett in a Victorian Revival style that was fashionable in Britain at the time, the theater portion was built in 1862 as the Town Hall. Victoria Memorial Hall was built in 1905 as a memorial to Queen Victoria, retaining the same style of the old building. The clock tower was added a year later. In 1909, with its name changed to Victoria Theatre, the hall opened with an amateur production of the *Pirates of Penzance*. Another notable performance occurred when Noël Coward passed through Singapore and stepped in at the last moment to help out a traveling English theatrical company that had lost a leading man. The building looks much the same as it did then, though of course the interiors have been modernized. It was completely renovated in 1979, conserving all the original details, and was renamed Victoria Concert Hall. It housed the Singapore Symphony Orchestra until the opening of the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay, when they shifted to the larger digs.

9 Empress Place, at the southern end of the Padang. ✆ **65/6339-6120.** www.vch.org.sg. Free admission to lobby areas. Concert tickets priced depending on performance and seat location. 15-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

ALONG THE RIVER

The Singapore River had always been the heart of life in Singapore even before Raffles landed, but for many years during the 20th century life here was dead—quite literally. Rapid urban development that began in the 1950s turned the river into a giant sewer, killing all plant and animal life in it. In the mid-1980s, though, the government began a large and very successful cleanup project; and shortly thereafter, the buildings at Boat Quay and Clarke Quay, and later Robertson Quay, were restored. A display on the second floor of the Asian Civilisations Museum relates the story of the river and its cleanup. Now the areas on both banks of the river offer entertainment, food, and pubs day and night, and the riverbank is dotted with life-size bronze sculptures of the "people of the river."

Boat Quay ★ Known as "the belly of the carp" by the local Chinese because of its shape, this area was once notorious for its opium dens and coolie shops. Nowadays, thriving restaurants boast every cuisine imaginable, and the rocking nightlife offers a variety of sounds—jazz, rock, blues, Indian, and Caribe. ***Note:*** Pronounce quay like *key.*

Located on the south bank of the Singapore River btw. Cavenagh Bridge and Elgin Bridge. Free admission. 5-min. walk from Clarke Quay MRT.

Chettiar's Hindu Temple (aka the Tank Road Temple) One of the richest and grandest of its kind in Southeast Asia, the Tank Road Temple is most famous for a ***thoonganai maadam,*** a statue of an elephant's backside in a seated position. It's said that there are only four others of the kind, located in four temples in India.

The original temple was completed in 1860, restored in 1962, and practically rebuilt in 1984. The many sculptures of Hindu deities and the carved Kamalam-patterned rosewood doors, arches, and columns were executed by architect-sculptors imported from Madras, India, specifically for the job. The Hindu child god, Lord Muruga, rules over the temple and is visible in one form or another wherever you look. Also notice the statues of the god Shiva and his wife, Kali, captured in their lively dance competition. The story goes that Kali was winning the competition, so Shiva lifted his leg above his head, something a woman wasn't thought capable of doing. He won and quit dancing—good thing, too, because every time Shiva did a little jig he destroyed part of the world. Outside in the courtyard are statues of the wedding of Lord Muruga; his brother, Ganesh; another brother, Vishnu; and their father, Shiva; along with Brahma, the creator of all.

Used daily for worship, the temple is also the culmination point of Thaipusam, a celebration of thanks, and the Festival of Navarathiri.

15 Tank Rd., close to the intersection of Clemenceau Ave. and River Valley Rd. ✆ **65/6737-9393.** Daily 8am–noon and 5:30–8pm. Free admission. 20-min. walk from Clarke Quay MRT.

Clarke Quay The largest of the waterfront developments, Clarke Quay was named for the second governor of Singapore, Sir Andrew Clarke. In the 1880s, a pineapple cannery, iron foundry, and numerous warehouses made this area bustle. Today, with 60 restored warehouses hosting restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, the Quay still hops. **River House,** formerly the home of a *towkay* (company president), occupies the oldest building, a beautiful building that's become a popular bar and restaurant run by the Indo-Chine group. During the day, children love to play in the water jets that shoot up from the floor in Clarke Quay's central hub, but when the fountains are switched off the area is used for special events and occasional markets.

Also here, **G-Max Reverse Bungy** (3E River Valley Rd.; ✆ **65/6338-1146;** www.gmax.co.nz) will strap you and two buddies into a cage and fling you around at the end of giant bungee cords for only S$45 ($30/£20) each. You'll go up 60m (197 ft.) high at 200kmph (124 mph). Despite its name, the next-door **Xtreme Swing** is slightly less extreme, propelling five people above the river and back for $40 ($27/£18) a time, though it's still not for the fainthearted. Stop by during weekdays from 1pm to 1am, and on weekends from noon until late.

River Valley Rd. west of Coleman Bridge. ✆ **65/6337-3292.** www.clarkequay.com.sg. Free admission. Clarke Quay MRT.

Esplanade Park Esplanade Park and Queen Elizabeth Walk, two of the most famous parks in Singapore, were established in 1943 on land reclaimed from the sea. Several memorials are located here. The first is a fountain built in 1857 to honor **Tan Kim Seng,**

who gave a great sum of money toward the building of a waterworks. Another monument, the **Cenotaph,** commemorates the 124 Singaporeans who died in World War I; it was dedicated by the Prince of Wales. On the reverse side, the names of those who died in World War II have been inscribed. The third prominent memorial is dedicated to **Major General Lim Bo Seng,** a member of the Singaporean underground resistance in World War II who was captured and killed by the Japanese. His memorial was unveiled in 1954 on the 10th anniversary of his death. At the far end of the park are the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay. Fashioned after the Sydney Opera House, the unique double-domed structure is known locally as the Durians, because their spiky domes resemble halves of durian shells (the building itself is actually smooth—the "spikes" are sun shields).

Connaught Dr., on the marina, running from the mouth of the Singapore River along the Padang to the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay. Daily until midnight. Free admission. 10-min. walk from City Hall MRT.

Merlion Park The Merlion is Singapore's half-lion, half-fish national symbol, the lion representing Singapore's roots as the "Lion City" and the fish representing the nation's close ties to the sea. He was the creation of some scheming marketers at the Singapore Tourism Board in the early 1970s. Despite the Merlion's commercial beginnings, he's been adopted as the national symbol and spouts continuously every day at the mouth of the Singapore River.

South bank, at the mouth of the Singapore River, adjacent to One Fullerton. Free admission. Daily 7am–10pm. 15-min. walk from either City Hall or Raffles Place MRT.

CHINATOWN & TANJONG PAGAR

Al-Abrar Mosque This mosque, also called Masjid Chulia after the Chulias, the group of Indian moneylender immigrants who funded its construction (*masjid* is Malay for mosque), was originally erected as a thatched building in 1827, thus its Tamil name Kuchu Palli, which means "hut mosque." The building that stands today was built in the 1850s, and even though it faces Mecca, the complex conforms with the grid of the neighborhood's city streets. It was designated a national monument in 1974, and in the late 1980s the mosque underwent major renovations that enlarged the *mihrab* and stripped away some of the ornamental qualities of the columns in the building. The one-story prayer hall was extended upward into a two-story gallery. Little touches such as the timber window panels and fanlight windows have been carried over into the new renovations.

192 Telok Ayer St., near the corner of Telok Ayer St. and Amoy St., near Thian Hock Keng Temple. ✆ **65/6220-6306.** Free admission. 15-min. walk from either Raffles Place or Tanjong Pagar MRT.

Chinatown Heritage Centre ★★ This block of three old shophouses in the center of the Chinatown heritage district has been converted into a display that tells the story of the Chinese immigrants who came to Singapore to find work in the early days of the colony. Walk through rooms filled with period antiques replicating coolie living quarters, shops, clan association houses, and other places that were prominent in daily life. It reminded me of the museum on Ellis Island in New York City that walks visitors through the immigrant experience of the early 1900s. Like Ellis Island, this display also has detailed descriptions to explain each element of the immigrant experience. The tiny cubicles where large families and groups scratched out a meager existence are an affecting picture of the hardships they faced.

48 Pagoda St. ✆ **65/6325-2878.** www.chinatownheritage.com.sg. Adults S$9.80 ($6.60/£4.40), children S$6.30 ($4.20/£2.80). Daily 9am–8pm. English-language tour every hour. 5-min. walk from Chinatown MRT.

Jamae Mosque Jamae Mosque was built by the Chulias, Tamil Muslims who were some of the earlier immigrants to Singapore and who had a very influential hold over Indian Muslim life centered in the Chinatown area. The Chulias built not only this mosque, but the Al-Abrar Mosque and the Nagore Durgha Shrine as well. Jamae Mosque dates from 1827 but wasn't completed until the early 1830s. The mosque stands today almost exactly as it did then.

Although the front gate is typical of mosques you'd see in southern India, inside, most of the buildings reflect the neoclassical style of architecture introduced in administrative buildings and homes designed by George Coleman and favored by the Europeans. There are also some Malay touches in the timber work. A small shrine inside, which may be the oldest part of the mosque, was erected to memorialize a local religious leader, Muhammad Salih Valinva.

218 S. Bridge Rd., at the corner of S. Bridge Rd. and Mosque St. ✆ **65/6221-4165.** Free admission. Chinatown MRT. 10-min. walk from Chinatown MRT.

Lau Pa Sat Festival Pavilion Though it used to be well beloved, the locals think this place has become quite touristy—though lunchtime finds it still packed with financial district workers. Once the happy little hawker center known as Telok Ayer Market, it began life as a wet market, selling fruits, vegetables, and other foodstuffs. Now it's part hawker center, part Western fast-food outlets.

It all began on Market Street in 1823, in a structure that was later torn down, redesigned, and rebuilt by G. D. Coleman. Close to the water, seafood could be unloaded fresh off the pier. After the land in Telok Ayer Basin was reclaimed in 1879, the market was moved to its present home. A new design by James MacRitchie kept the original octagonal shape and was constructed of 3,000 prefab cast-iron elements brought in from Europe.

In the 1970s, as the financial district began to develop, the pavilion was dominated by hawkers who fed the lunchtime business crowd. In the mid-1980s, the structure was torn down to make way for the MRT construction and then meticulously put back together, puzzle piece by puzzle piece. By 1989, the market was once again an urban landmark, but it sat vacant until Scotts Holdings successfully tendered to convert it into a festival market. At this time, numerous changes were made to the building, which was renamed Lau Pa Sat (Old Market) in acknowledgment of the name by which the market had been known by generations of Singaporeans. Lau Pa Sat is one of the few hawker centers that's open 24 hours, in case you need a coffee or snack before retiring.

18 Raffles Quay, located in the entire block flanked by Robinson Rd., Cross St., Shenton Way, and Boon Tat St. Free admission. Daily 24 hr. 10-min. walk from Raffles Place MRT.

Nagore Durgha Shrine Although this is a Muslim place of worship, it is not a mosque, but a shrine, built to commemorate a visit to the island by a Muslim holy man of the Chulia people (Muslim merchants and moneylenders from India's Coromandel Coast), who was traveling around Southeast Asia spreading the word of Indian Islam. The most interesting visual feature is its facade: Two arched windows flank an arched doorway, with columns in between. Above these is a "miniature palace"—a massive replica of the facade of a palace, with tiny cutout windows and a small arched doorway in the middle. The cutouts in white plaster make it look like lace. From the corners of the facade, two 14-level minarets rise, with three little domed cutouts on each level and onion domes on top. Inside, the prayer halls and two shrines are painted and decorated in shockingly tacky colors.

Controversy surrounds the dates that the shrine was built. The government, upon naming the Nagore Durgha a national monument, claimed it was built sometime in the 1820s; however, Nagoreallauddeen, who is the 15th descendant of the holy man for whom the shrine is named, claims it was built many years before. According to Nagoreallauddeen, the shrine was first built out of wood and *attap* (a thatch roof made from a type of palm), and later, in 1815, was rebuilt from limestone, 4 years before the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles. In 1818, rebuilding materials were imported from India to construct the present shrine. ***Note:*** The shrine has been closed for renovation but is due to reopen in summer 2009.

140 Telok Ayer St., at the corner of Telok Ayer St. and Boon Tat St. 15-min. walk from either Raffles Place or Tanjong Pagar MRT.

Sacred Buddha Tooth Temple ★★ Allow at least an hour and a half to appreciate this huge temple, which was founded in 2002. Built in the Tang Dynasty style, this is actually a Chinese cultural center, encompassing among other things a temple, a museum and reference library, a theater, a dining hall providing free meals, and of course the magnificent reliquary that gives the temple its name. The best place to start is in the huge 100 Dragons Hall on the first floor, where services dedicated to the Maitreya Buddha take place, with a further hall behind celebrating the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Then take the elevator (lined with gold-embroidered fabric) to the third story, where a nicely laid-out museum examines the life of the Buddha and explains the role of the future Maitreya Buddha and the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the representation of Kindness and Compassion. The sacred tooth itself is on the fourth floor, encased in a magnificent golden stupa, which itself sits on a (presumably reinforced) floor of pure gold tiles. The stupa depicts the 35 Buddhas who have achieved enlightenment and nirvana, surrounding the serene figure of the Maitreya Buddha who is guarded by four lions. The stupa is unveiled from 9am to noon and 3 to 6pm daily. A staircase leads to the lovely roof garden (there is a stairlift if required) where the world's largest enameled prayer wheel turns slowly in the Ten Thousand Buddhas Pavilion. Still not enough Buddhas for you? There are another 12,000 in the galleries outside the pavilion. These are dedicated to the Buddha of Longevity. For S$68 ($46/£31) a year, you can light up one of these tiny figures and help to negate all the bad karma created since the beginning of time. Or you could spend S$2 ($1.35/90p) to sponsor a very tangible vegetarian meal, distributed from the basement dining hall.

288 S. Bridge Rd. ✆ **65/6220-0220.** www.btrts.org.sg. Free admission. Daily 4:30am–9pm. 5-min. walk from Chinatown MRT.

Singapore City Gallery This enormous exhibit is perhaps of real interest only to Singaporeans and civil planners, but if you're in the neighborhood, it's worth a pop inside to see the giant wooden plan of the city in miniature that sits on the right side of the lobby. If you have time, sift through 48 permanent exhibits and 25 interactive displays that paint a historical picture of the development of urban Singapore.

URA Centre, 45 Maxwell Rd. ✆ **65/6321-8321.** www.ura.gov.sg. Free admission. Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; Sat 9am–1pm. 10-min. walk from Tanjong Pagar MRT.

Sri Mariamman Hindu Temple As the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore, Sri Mariamman has been the central point of Hindu tradition and culture. In its early years, the temple housed new immigrants while they established themselves and also served as social center for the community. Today, the main celebration here is the Thimithi Festival

in October or November. The shrine is dedicated to the goddess Sri Mariamman, who is known for curing disease (a very important goddess to have around in those days), but as is the case at all other Hindu temples, the entire pantheon of Hindu gods are present to be worshiped as well. On either side of the *gopuram* are statues of Shiva and Vishnu, while inside are two smaller shrines to Vinayagar and Sri Ararvan. Also note the sacred cows that lounge along the top of the temple walls.

The temple originated as a small wood-and-thatch shrine founded by Naraina Pillai, an Indian merchant who came to Singapore with Raffles's first expedition and found his fortune in trade. In the main hall of the temple is the small god that Pillai originally placed here.

244 S. Bridge Rd., at the corner of S. Bridge Rd. and Pagoda St. ✆ **65/6223-4064.** Free admission. 10-min. walk from Chinatown MRT.

Thian Hock Keng Temple ★★★ Thian Hock Keng, the "Temple of Heavenly Bliss," is one of the oldest Chinese temples in Singapore. Before land reclamation, when the shoreline came right up to Telok Ayer Road, the first Chinese sailors landed here and immediately built a shrine, a small wood-and-thatch structure, to pray to the goddess Ma Cho Po for allowing their voyage to be safely completed. For each subsequent boatload of Chinese sailors, the shrine was always the first stop upon landing. Ma Cho Po, the Mother of the Heavenly Sages, was the patron goddess of sailors, and every Chinese junk of the day had an altar dedicated to her.

The temple that stands today was built in 1841 over the shrine with funds from the Hokkien community, led by the efforts of two Melaka-born philanthropists, Tan Tock Seng and Tan Kim Seng. All of the building materials were imported from China, except for the gates, which came from Glasgow, Scotland, and the tiles on the facade, which are from Holland. The doorway is flanked by two lions, a male with a ball to symbolize strength and a female with a lion cub to symbolize fertility. On the door are door gods, mythical beasts made from the combined body parts of many animals. Note the wooden bar that sits at the foot of the temple entrance (as do similar bars in so many Chinese temples). This serves a couple of purposes: First, it keeps out wandering ghosts, who cannot cross over the barrier. Second, it forces anyone entering the temple to look down as he crosses, bowing his head in humility. Just inside the door are granite tablets that record the temple's history.

Ahead at the main altar is Ma Cho Po, and on either side are statues of the Protector of Life and the God of War. To the side of the main hall is a Gambler Brother statue, prayed to for luck and riches. From here you can see the temple's construction of brackets and beams, fitting snugly together and carved with warheroes, saints, flowers, and animals, all in red and black lacquer and gilded in gold. Behind the main hall is an altar to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. Beside her are the sun and moon gods.

To the left of the courtyard are the ancestral tablets. In keeping with Confucian filial piety, each represents a soul. The tablets with red paper are for souls still alive. Also in the temple complex are a pagoda and a number of outer buildings that at one time housed a school and community associations. The right wing of the temple is shared with the Faculty, a center for creative arts, holding classes for dance, acting, and vocals. Even if you don't have a burning desire to learn to tango, the elaborate pagoda is an incredible spot for a cool drink, tucked away behind the ornate temple gate.

158 Telok Ayer St., ½ block beyond Nagore Durgha Shrine. ✆ **65/6423-4616.** Free admission. 15-min. walk from Tanjong Pagar MRT.

Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple ★★ One of the oldest Taoist temples in Singapore, this is also known as Yueh Hai Ching Temple. Like most of Singapore's Chinese temples, Wak Hai Cheng Bio had its start as a simple wood-and-thatch shrine where sailors, when they got off their ships, would go to express their gratitude for sailing safely to their destination. Before the major land-reclamation projects shifted the shoreline outward, the temple was close to the water's edge, and so it was named "Temple of the Calm Sea Built by the Guangzhou People." It's a Teochew temple, located in a part of Chinatown originally populated by this dialect group.

Inside the Taoist temple walls are two blocks, the one on the left devoted to Ma Cho Po, the Mother of Heavenly Sages, who protects travelers and ensures a safe journey. The one on the right is devoted to Siong Tek Kong, the god of business. Both are as important to the Chinese community today as they were way back when. Look for the statue of the Gambler Brother, with coins around his neck. The Chinese pray to him for wealth and luck; in olden days they would put opium on his lips.This custom is still practiced today, only now they use a black herbal paste called *koyo,* which is conveniently legal.

Inside the temple you can buy joss sticks and paper for S$2.50 ($1.50/85p).Three joss sticks are for heaven, your parents, and yourself, to be burned before the altar. Three corresponding packets of elaborately decorated paper and gold leaf are to be burned outside in the gourd-shaped kilns (gourd being a symbol of health). The joss or "wishing paper," four thin sheets stamped with black and red characters, has many meanings. The red sheet is for luck (red being particularly auspicious) and the other three are to wash away your sins, for a long life, and for your wishes to be carried to heaven. Even if you are not Taoist, you're more than welcome to burn the joss.

The temple itself is quite a visual treat, with ceramic figurines and pagodas adorning the roof, and every nook and cranny of the structure adorned with tiny three-dimensional reliefs that depict scenes from Chinese operas. The spiral joss hanging in the courtyard adds an additional picturesque effect.

30-B Phillip St., at the corner of Phillip St. and Church St. Free admission. 5-min. walk from Raffles Place MRT.

LITTLE INDIA

Little India did not develop as a community planned by the colonial authorities like Kampong Glam or Chinatown, but came into being because immigrants to India were drawn to business developments here. In the late 1920s, the government established a brick kiln and lime pits here that attracted Indian workers, and the abundance of grass and water made the area attractive to Indian cattle traders.

A word of advice: If you visit Little India on a Sunday, be prepared for a mob scene. Sunday is the only day off for Singapore's many immigrant Indian and Bangladeshi laborers, so Serangoon Road gets a little crazy.

Abdul Gafoor Mosque This charming little mosque is resplendent, thanks to a loving restoration completed in 2008. Nestled behind a row of shophouses, you really can't see it until you arrive at the gate. Inside the compound, the bright yellow and green facade and minarets reflect an Indian Muslim architectural preference, most likely imported with the mosque's builder, Sheik Abdul Gafoor. The original mosque on this site, called Al-Abrar Mosque, was constructed of wood in 1859, and is commemorated on a granite plaque within the compound. The newer mosque on the site was built in 1907 and includes some unusual features, including ornate European-style columns and

 the sunburst above the main entrance. This "sundial" has 25 rays in Arabic calligraphy relief said to represent the 25 prophets in the Koran.

Inside the courtyard, an information office provides robes for those in shorts and sleeveless tops. As in every mosque, the main prayer hall is off-limits to non-Muslims.

41 Dunlop St., btw. Perak Rd. and Jalan Besar. ✆ **65/6295-4209.** Free admission. 15-min. walk from Little India MRT.

Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya (Temple of a Thousand Lights) Thai elements influence this temple, from the *chedi* (stupa) roofline to the huge Thai-style Buddha image inside. Often this temple is brushed off as strange and tacky, but all sorts of surprises are inside, making the place a veritable Buddha theme park. On the right side of the altar, statues of baby bodhisattvas receive toys and sweets from devotees. Around the base of the altar, murals depict scenes from the life of Prince Siddhartha (the Buddha) as he searches for enlightenment. Follow them around to the back of the hall, and you'll find a small doorway to a chamber under the altar. Another Buddha image reclines inside, this one shown at the end of his life, beneath the Yellow Seraka tree. On the left side of the main part of the hall is a replica of a footprint left by the Buddha in Ceylon. Next to that is a wheel of fortune; for S50¢ (30¢/20p) you get one spin.

336 Race Course Rd., 1 block past Perumal Rd. ✆ **65/6294-0714.** Free admission. Daily 8am–4pm. 5-min. walk from Farrer Park MRT.

Sri Perumal Temple Sri Perumal Temple, built in 1855, is devoted to the worship of Vishnu. As part of the Hindu trinity, Vishnu is the sustainer, balancing out Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer. When the world is out of whack, he rushes to its aid, reincarnating himself to show mankind that there are always new directions for development.

On the first tier to the left of the front entrance on the *gopuram,* statues depict Vishnu's nine reincarnations. Rama, the sixth incarnation, is with Hanuman, the monkey god, who helped him in the fierce battle to free his wife from kidnapping. Krishna, shown reclining amid devotees, is the eighth incarnation and a hero of many Hindu legends, most notably the Bhagavad-Gita. Also up there is the half-human and half-bird Garuda, Vishnu's steed. Inside the temple are altars to Vishnu, his two wives, and Garuda.

During Thaipusam, the main festival celebrated here, male devotees who have made vows over the year carry *kavadi*—huge steel racks decorated with flowers and fruits and held onto their bodies by skewers and hooks—to show their thanks and devotion, while women carry milk pots in a parade from Sri Perumal Temple to Chettiar's Temple on Tank Road.

397 Serangoon Rd., ½ block past Perumal Rd. Free admission. Best times to visit are daily 7–11am or 5–7:30pm. 5-min. walk from Farrer Park MRT.

Sri Veerama Kaliamman Temple ★★ This Hindu temple is primarily for the worship of Shiva's wife, Kali, who destroys ignorance, maintains world order, and blesses those who strive for knowledge of God. The box on the walkway to the front entrance is for smashing coconuts, a symbolic smashing of the ego, asking God to show "the humble way." The coconuts have two small "eyes" at one end so they can "see" the personal obstacles to humility they are being asked to smash.

Inside the temple in the main hall are three altars, the center one for Kali (depicted with 16 arms and wearing a necklace of human skulls) and two altars on either side for her two sons—Ganesh, the elephant god, and Murugan, the four-headed child god. To the right is an altar with nine statues representing the nine planets. Circle the altar and pray to your planet for help with a specific trouble.

Around the left side of the main hall, the first tier of the *gopuram* tells the story of how Ganesh got his elephant head. A small dais in the rear left corner of the temple compound is an altar to Sri Periyachi, a very mean looking woman with a heart of gold. She punishes women who say and do things to make others feel bad. She also punishes men—under her feet is an exploiter of women.

141 Serangoon Rd. at Veerasamy Rd. Free admission. Daily 8am–noon and 5:30–8:30pm. 10-min. walk from Little India MRT.

ARAB STREET & KAMPONG GLAM

Alsagoff Arab School Built in 1912, the school was named for Syed Ahmad Alsagoff, a wealthy Arab merchant and philanthropist who was very influential in Singapore's early colonial days and who died in 1906. It is the oldest girls' school in Singapore and was the island's first Muslim school.

121 Jalan Sultan, across from Sultan Plaza. 15-min. walk from Bugis MRT.

Hajjah Fatimah Mosque ★★ Hajjah Fatimah was a wealthy businesswoman from Melaka and something of a local socialite. She married a Bugis prince from Celebes, and their only child, a daughter, married Syed Ahmad Alsagoff (see **Alsagoff Arab School,** above). Hajjah Fatimah had originally built a home on this site, but after it had been robbed a couple of times and later set on fire, she decided to find a safer home and built a mosque here instead.

Inside the high walls of the compound are the prayer hall, an ablution area, gardens and mausoleums, and a few other buildings. You can walk around the main prayer halls to the garden cemeteries, where flat square headstones mark the graves of women and round ones mark the graves of men. Hajjah Fatimah is buried in a private room to the side of the main prayer hall, along with her daughter and son-in-law.

The minaret tower in the front was designed by an unknown European architect and could be a copy of the original spire of St. Andrew's Cathedral. The tower leans a little, a fact that's much more noticeable from the inside. On the outside of the tower is a bleeding heart—an unexpected place to find such a downright Christian symbol. It's a great example of what makes this mosque so charming—all the combined influences of Moorish, Chinese, and European architectural styles.

4001 Beach Rd., past Jalan Sultan. ✆ **65/6297-2774.** Free admission. 20-min. walk from Bugis MRT.

Malay Heritage Centre (Istana Kampong Glam) ★★ The Centre has lovingly displayed exhibits that offer a glimpse into Singapore's early Malay settlements, the sultan's royal family, Malay arts, and 20th-century Malay life.

Galleries on the first floor relate the story of the immigration of Muslim Malays to Singapore and their central role in the island's trading culture. Upstairs there are displays that deal with the modern history of the Malay community and a re-creation of a traditional kampong (village) house and an early HDB apartment.

The house to the left before the main gate of the Istana compound is called **Gedong Kuning,** or Yellow Mansion. It was the home of Tenkgu Mahmoud, the heir to Kampong Glam. Today it houses a Malay restaurant, **Tepak Sireh** (✆ **65/6393-4373;** daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10pm).

85 Sultan Gate. ✆ **65/6391-0450.** Adults S$4 ($2.70/£1.80), children S$3 ($2/£1.40), free admission to Istana compound. Mon 1–6pm; Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. 15-min. walk from Bugis MRT.

Sultan Mosque ★ Though more than 80 mosques exist on the island of Singapore, Sultan Mosque is the real center of the Muslim community. The mosque that stands today

is the second Sultan Mosque to be built on this site. The first was built in 1826, partially funded by the East India Company as part of their agreement to leave Kampong Glam to Sultan Hussein and his family in return for sovereign rights to Singapore. The present mosque was built in 1928 and was funded by donations from the Muslim community. The Saracenic flavor of the onion domes, topped with crescent moons and stars, is complemented by Mogul cupolas. Funny thing, though: The mosque was designed by an Irish guy named Denis Santry, who was working for the architectural firm Swan and McLaren.

Other interesting facts about the mosque: Its dome base is a ring of black bottles; the carpeting was donated by a prince of Saudi Arabia and bears his emblem; and at the back of the compound, North Bridge Road has a kink in it, showing where the mosque invaded the nicely planned urban grid pattern. Also, if you make your way through the chink where the back of the building almost touches the compound wall, peer inside the *makam* to see the royal graves. The mosque provides cloaks to cover up; they hang just to the right as you walk up the stairs.

3 Muscat St. ✆ **65/6293-4405.** Free admission. Daily 9am–1pm and 2–4pm. No visiting is allowed during Mass Fri 11:30am–2:30pm. 15-min. walk from Bugis MRT.

ORCHARD ROAD AREA

The Istana and Sri Temasek In 1859, the construction of Fort Canning necessitated the demolition of the original governors' residence, and the autocratic and unpopular governor-general Sir Harry St. George Ord proposed this structure be built as the new residence. Though the construction of such a large and expensive edifice was unpopular, the design and construction went through, with the building mainly performed by convicts.

In its picturesque landscaped setting, Government House echoed Anglo-Indian architecture, but its symmetrical and cross-shaped plan also echoed the form of the traditional Malay *istana* (palace). During the occupation, the house was occupied by Field Marshal Count Terauchi, commander of the Japanese Southern Army, and Major General Kawamura, commander of the Singapore Defense Forces. With independence, the building was renamed the Istana and today serves as the official residence of the president of the Republic of Singapore. Used mainly for state and ceremonial occasions, the grounds are open to every citizen on selected public holidays, though they're not generally open for visits. The house's domain includes several other houses of senior colonial civil servants. The colonial secretary's residence, a typical 19th-century bungalow, is also listed as a monument and is now called Sri Temasek.

Orchard Rd., btw. Claymore and Scotts roads. Free admission. 5-min. walk from Dhoby Ghaut MRT.

Peranakan Place ★ Emerald Hill was once nothing more than a wide treeless street along whose sides quiet families lived in typical terrace houses, residential units similar to shophouses with a walled courtyard in the front instead of the usual "five-foot way." Toward Orchard Road, the terrace houses turned into shophouses, with their first floors occupied by small provisioners, seamstresses, and dry-goods stores.

As Orchard Road developed, so did Emerald Hill. The shophouses close to Orchard Road became restaurants and bars, and the street was closed off to vehicular traffic. Now it's an alfresco cafe, landscaped with a veritable jungle of potted foliage and peopled by colorful tourists—much different from its humble beginnings.

But as you pass Emerald Hill, don't just blow it off as a tourist trap. Walk through the cafe area and out the back onto Emerald Hill. All of the terrace houses have been redone,

and magnificently. For a peek inside some of these wonderful places, check out the photos in *Living Legacy: Singapore's Architectural Heritage Renewed,* by Robert Powell.

Intersection of Emerald Hill and Orchard Rd. Free admission. 5-min. walk from Somerset MRT.

WESTERN SINGAPORE

Bukit Timah Nature Reserve ★★ Bukit Timah Nature Reserve is pure primary rainforest. Believed to be as old as 1 million years, it's the only place on the island with vegetation that exists exactly as it was before the British settled here. The park is more than 164 hectares (202 acres) of soaring canopy teeming with mammals and birds and a lush undergrowth with bugs, butterflies, and reptiles. Here you can see more than 700 plant species, many of which are exotic ferns, plus mammals such as long-tailed macaques, squirrels, and lemurs. There's a visitor center and four well-marked paths, one of which leads to Singapore's highest point. At 163m (535 ft.) above sea level, don't expect a nosebleed, but some of the scenic views of the island are really nice. Also at Bukit Timah is Hindhede Quarry, which filled up with water at some point, so you can take a dip and cool off during your hike. The National Parks Board gives free guided tours on the first Sunday of the month at around 4pm; call ✆ **65/6554-5127** to register.

177 Hindhede Dr. ✆ **6468-5736.** www.nparks.gov.sg. Free admission. Daily 8:30am–6:30pm. Newton MRT, then bus no. 171 to park entrance.

Chinese and Japanese Gardens Situated on two islands in Jurong Lake, the gardens are reached by an overpass and joined by the Bridge of Double Beauty. The **Chinese Garden** dedicates most of its area to "northern style" landscape architecture, the style of Imperial gardens, integrating brightly colored buildings with the surroundings. The Stoneboat is a replica of the stone boat at the Summer Palace in Beijing. Inside the Pure Air of the Universe building are courtyards and a pond, and there is a seven-story pagoda, the odd number of floors symbolizing continuity.

The Garden of Beauty, in Suzhou style, represents the southern style of landscape architecture. Southern gardens were built predominantly by scholars, poets, and men of wealth. Sometimes called Black-and-White gardens, these smaller gardens had more fine detail, featuring subdued colors as the plants and elements of the rich natural landscape gave them plenty to work with. Inside the Suzhou garden are 2,000 pots of *penjiang* (bonsai) and displays of small rocks.

While the Chinese garden is more visually stimulating, the **Japanese Garden** is intended to evoke feeling. Marble-chip paths let you hear your own footsteps and meditate on the sound. They also serve to slow the journey for better gazing. The Keisein, or "Dry Garden," uses white pebbles to create images of streams. Ten stone lanterns, a small traditional house, and a rest house are nestled between two ponds with smaller islands joined by bridges. The pond area is regularly patrolled by huge monitor lizards. There is also a live turtle and tortoise museum, with a famous two-headed specimen; adults S$5 ($3.35/£2.25), children S$3 ($2/£1.35).

Toilets are situated at stops along the way, as well as benches to have a rest or to just take in the sights. Paddle boats can be rented for S$5 ($3.35/£2.25) per hour just outside the main entrance.

1 Chinese Garden Rd. ✆ **65/6261-3632.** Free admission; admission to Garden of Abundance adults S$2 ($1.35/90p), children S$1 (70¢/50p). Daily 6am–11pm. Chinese Garden MRT.

Haw Par Villa (Tiger Balm Gardens) ★ In 1935, brothers Haw Boon Haw and Haw Boon Par—creators of Tiger Balm, the camphor and menthol rub that comes in those

cool little pots—took their fortune and opened Tiger Balm Gardens as a venue for teaching traditional Chinese values. They made more than 1,000 statues and life-size dioramas depicting Chinese legends and historical tales and illustrating morality and Confucian beliefs. But Tiger Balm Gardens suffered a horrible fate. In 1985, it was converted into an amusement park and reopened as Haw Par Villa. Most of the statues and scenes were taken away and replaced with rides, and the park lost money fast. But recently, in an attempt to regain some of the original Tiger Balm Garden edge, they replaced many of the old statues, some of which are a great backdrop for really kitschy vacation photos, and ditched the rides. They also decided to open the gates free of charge.

262 Pasir Panjang Rd. ✆ **65/6872-2780.** Free admission. Daily 9am–7pm. Buona Vista MRT and transfer to bus no. 200.

Jurong BirdPark ★ Kids Jurong BirdPark, with a collection of 9,000 birds from more than 600 species, showcases Southeast Asian breeds plus other colorful tropical beauties, some of which are endangered. The more than 20 hectares (50 acres) can be easily walked, or you can ride the panorail (S$5/$3.35/£2.25) for a bird's-eye view of the grounds. I enjoy the Waterfall Aviary, the world's largest walk-in aviary. It's an up-close-and-personal experience with African and South American birds, plus a pretty stroll through landscaped tropical forest. This is where you'll also see the world's tallest man-made waterfall, but the true feat of engineering here is the panorail station, built inside the aviary. Another smaller walk-in aviary is for Southeast Asian endangered bird species; at noon every day this aviary experiences a man-made thunderstorm, and the Lory Loft, where a couple of dollars for bird feed buys you a swooping entourage of colorful friends. The daily guided tours and regularly scheduled feeding times are enlightening. Other bird exhibits are the flamingo pools, the World of Darkness (featuring nocturnal birds), and the penguin parade.

The **World of Hawks** show at 10am and **Kings of the Skies** at 4pm features birds of prey either acting out their natural instincts or performing falconry tricks. The **Birds n' Buddies** show takes place at 11am and 3pm, with trained parrots that race bikes and birds that perform all sorts of silliness, including staged birdie misbehaviors.

2 Jurong Hill. ✆ **65/6265-0022.** www.birdpark.com.sg. Adults S$18 ($12/£8), children 3–12 S$9 ($6/£4). Park Hopper Ticket for Zoo, Night Safari and BirdPark: adults S$40 ($27/£18), children S$20 ($13/£9). Daily 9am–6pm. Boon Lay MRT and transfer to bus no. 194 or 251.

Singapore Botanic Gardens ★★ In 1822, Singapore's first botanic garden was started at Fort Canning by Sir Stamford Raffles. After it lost funding, the present Botanic Garden came into being in 1859 thanks to the efforts of a horticulture society; it was later turned over to the government for upkeep. More than just a garden, this space occupied an important place in the region's economic development when "Mad" Henry Ridley, one of the garden's directors, imported Brazilian rubber tree seedlings from Great Britain. He devised improved latex-trapping methods and led the campaign to convince reluctant coffee growers to switch plantation crops. The garden also pioneered orchid hybridization, breeding a number of internationally acclaimed varieties.

Carved out within the tropical setting lies a marsh garden awash with water lilies and papyrus plants, the sundial garden with pruned hedges, and a ginger garden filled with 300 related specimens of a family that includes lilies, turmeric, and even bananas. Sculptures by international artists dot throughout. As you wander, look for the Cannonball tree (named for its cannonball-shaped fruit), Para rubber trees, teak trees, bamboos, and a huge array of palms, including the sealing wax palm—distinguished by its bright

scarlet stalks—and the rumbia palm, which bears the pearl sago. The fruit of the silk-cotton tree is a pod filled with silky stuffing that was once used for stuffing pillows. Flowers such as bougainvilleas and heliconias add beautiful color.

The **National Orchid Garden** is 3 hectares (7½ acres) of gorgeous orchids growing along landscaped walks. The English Garden features hybrids developed here and named after famous visitors to the garden—there's the beautifully twisted Margaret Thatcher, the Benazir Bhutto, the Vaclav Havel, and more. The gift shops sell live hydroponic orchids in test tubes for souvenirs.

At the Bukit Timah edge of the Botanic Gardens is Asia's first dedicated children's garden. The **Jacob Ballas Children's Garden** is a lovely place for under-12s to play and explore while developing an appreciation for plants and nature. Children can do outdoor puzzles, learn about food and drinks that come from plants, explore the maze, or become happily soaked pumping water in the potting garden (swimming gear or a change of clothing is recommended here). Admission is free, and it's open Tuesday to Sunday from 8am to 7pm (✆ **65/6465-0196**).

The gardens have three lakes. Symphony Lake surrounds an island band shell for "Concert in the Park" performances by the local symphony and international entertainers. Call visitor services at the number below for performance schedules.

Volunteers run free guided tours of different areas of the park every Saturday at 9 and 10am, often with additional tours at 11am and 4pm. Register 15 minutes before the walk at the visitor center near Nassim Gate.

Main entrance at corner of Cluny Rd. and Holland Rd. ✆ **65/6471-7361.** www.nparks.gov.sg. Free admission. Daily 5am–midnight. The National Orchid Garden adults S$5 ($3.40/£2.30), children 11 and under and seniors S$1 (70¢/50p). Daily 8:30am–7pm. Orchard MRT then bus no. 7, 105, 106, or 174 from Orchard Blvd.

Singapore Discovery Centre (Kids) Billing itself as an "edutainment" center, the SDC uses a phenomenal array of multimedia exhibits to encourage young Singaporeans to reflect on the culture of modern Singapore and its global ambitions. One offers visitors a chance to be an on-the-spot TV reporter, another lets you build a virtual community, measuring your success in providing basic infrastructure and meeting cultural needs along the way. Though the SDC is more focused on civilian life than it used to be, national defense is still the underlying focus of many exhibits—National Service remains mandatory for Singaporean men. That means there are plenty of military-style exhibits and games, including the Shooting Gallery, a computer-simulated combat firing range using real but decommissioned M16 rifles. IMAX features roll at the five-story iWERKS Theatre regularly, in two and three dimensions. When you get hungry, there's a fast-food court. You can also have a 30-minute bus tour of the neighboring Singapore Air Force Training Institute free with SDC admission. Inquire about tour times at the front counter.

510 Upper Jurong Rd. ✆ **65/6792-6188.** www.sdc.com.sg. Adults S$10 ($6.70/£4.50), children 11 and under S$6 ($4/£2.70). Tues–Sun 9am–6pm. MRT to Boon Lay; transfer to SBS no. 182 or 193.

Singapore Science Centre (Kids) The center features hands-on exhibits in true science-center spirit. Interestingly the 7,500 sq. m (80,729 sq. ft.) of exhibits directly relate to the science syllabus of the local school system, from primary school level all the way through junior college. The galleries are all clearly marked to explain their interactive use, and study sheets are also available. The free Water Works gallery outside is fantastic fun for kids (***warning:*** they'll be soaked in moments). The Technology Gallery is one of the more interesting exhibits if you can wrestle the kids away from the machines. The Discovery

Zone's insectarium is fascinating for anyone who isn't horrified by bugs. In the main atrium there's a Tesla coil that generates electrical sparks 5m (16 ft.) long. There's a Virtual Voyages simulation theater plus the Omni Theatre planetarium, which has a projection booth encased in glass so you can check out how it works, and an IMAX dome theater. Best to avoid visits during weekends and school holiday times in June and December.

15 Science Centre Rd., off Jurong Town Hall Rd. ✆ **65/6425-2500.** www.science.edu.sg. Adults S$6 ($4/£2.70), children 15 and under S$3 ($2/£1.40). Tues–Sun and public holidays 10am–6pm. Jurong East MRT to bus no. 66 or 335.

Southern Ridges ★★ This 9km (5½-mile) chain of park area starts at Mount Faber Park (where you can catch the cable car to Harbourfront and Sentosa Island) and ends at the West Coast Park. It incorporates two new pedestrian bridges, the Alexandra Arch and our favorite, the Henderson Waves bridge, which connects Mount Faber Park to Telok Blangah Hill; this is the highest pedestrian bridge in Singapore, offering great views over the city. It's also a beautiful piece of design in its own right, weaving like a ribbon over the treetops and featuring a curved wooden deck that rises in places to resemble a breaking wave, creating sheltered areas with seating. The Henderson Waves lead to a forest walk with an elevated pedestrian walkway and cycling trails through the Telok Blangah Hill Park. You can take bus services 131, 145, 176, or 648 to Henderson Road and walk up the hill, but it's more fun to take the MRT to Harbourfront and then the cable car to Mount Faber and walk from there.

Mount Faber Park entrance is from Telok Blangah Rd. or Henderson Rd., or via Harbourfront MRT/cable car. ✆ **800/471-7300.** www.nparks.gov.sg. Free admission. Daily 24 hr. Bus no. 131, 145, 176, or 648 to Henderson Rd. or MRT to Harbourfront and then cable car to Mount Faber.

CENTRAL & NORTHERN SINGAPORE

The northern part of Singapore contains most of the island's nature reserves and parks. Here's where you'll find the Singapore Zoo, in addition to some sights with historical and religious significance. Despite the presence of the **MRT** in the area, there is not any simple way to get from attraction to attraction with ease. Bus transfers to and from MRT stops are the way to go—or you could stick to taxicabs.

Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Temple The largest religious complex on the island, this place, called Phor Kark See for short, is comprised of prayer and meditation halls, a hospice, gardens, and a vegetarian restaurant. The largest building is the Chinese-style Hall of Great Compassion. There is also the octagonal Hall of Great Virtue and a towering pagoda. For S50¢ (30¢/15p), you can buy flower petals to place in a dish at the Buddha's feet. Compared to other temples on the island, Phor Kark See seems shiny—having only been built in 1981. As a result, the religious images inside carry a strange, almost artificial, cartoon air about them.

88 Bright Hill Dr., located in the center of the island to the east of Bukit Panjang Nature Preserve (Bright Hill Dr. is off Ang Mo Kio Ave.). ✆ **65/6453-4046.** Take MRT to Bishan; then take bus no. 410.

Kranji War Memorial Kranji Cemetery commemorates the Allied men and women who fought and died in World War II. Prisoners of war in a camp nearby began a burial ground here, and after the war it was enlarged to provide space for all the casualties. The Kranji War Cemetery is the site of 4,000 graves of servicemen, while the Singapore State Cemetery memorializes the names of more than 20,000 who died and have no known graves. Stones are laid geometrically on a slope with a view of the Strait of Johor. The memorial itself is designed to represent the three arms of the services.

Woodlands Rd., located in the very northern part of the island. Daily 7am–6pm. Kranji MRT.

Lian Shan Shuang Lin Temple This temple, in English "the Twin Groves of the Lotus Mountain Temple," has a great story behind its founding. One night in 1898, Hokkien businessman Low Kim Pong and his son had the same dream of a golden light shining from the west. The following day, the two went to the western shore and waited until, moments before sundown, a ship appeared carrying a group of Hokkien Buddhist monks and nuns on their way to China after a pilgrimage to India. Low Kim Pong vowed to build a monastery if they would stay in Singapore. They did.

Laid out according to feng shui principles, the buildings include the Dharma Hall, a main prayer hall, and drum and bell towers. They are arranged in *cong lin* style, a rare type of monastery design with a universal layout so that no matter how vast the grounds are, any monk can find his way around. The entrance hall has granite wall panels carved with scenes from Chinese history. The main prayer hall has fantastic details in the ceiling, wood panels, and other woodcarvings. In the back is a shrine to Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy.

Originally built amid farmland, the temple became surrounded by suburban high-rise apartments in the 1950s and 1960s, with the Toa Payoh Housing Development Board New Town project and the Pan-Island Expressway creeping close by.

184-E Jalan Toa Payoh. ✆ **65/6259-6924.** Free admission. Daily 8:30am–5pm. Located in Toa Payoh New Town. Toa Payoh MRT to bus no. 232, 237, or 238.

MacRitchie Nature Trail Of all the nature reserves in Singapore, the Central Catchment Nature Reserve is the largest at 2,000 hectares (5,000 acres). Located in the center of the island, it's home to four of Singapore's reservoirs: MacRitchie, Seletar, Pierce, and Upper Pierce. The rainforest here is secondary forest. There's one path for walking and jogging (no bicycles allowed) that stretches 3km (1¾ miles) from its start in the southeast corner of the reserve, turning to the edge of MacRitchie Reservoir, then letting you out at the Singapore Island Country Club. The TreeTop Walk is a 250m-long (820-ft.) suspension walkway that rises 25m (82 ft.) from the forest floor. The views are great, but it's a hike from the parking lots. The National Parks Board gives free guided tours on the second Sunday of the month at 9:30am (✆ **65/6554-5127**).

Central Catchment Nature Reserve. ✆ **65/6468-5736.** www.nparks.gov.sg. Free admission. From Orchard Rd. take bus no. 132 from the Orchard Parade Hotel. From Raffles City take bus no. 130. Get off at the bus stop near Little Sisters of the Poor. Next to Little Sisters of the Poor, follow the paved walkway, which turns into the trail.

Mandai Orchid Gardens John Laycock, the British founder of the Orchid Society of Southeast Asia, began the Mandai garden in 1951 to house his own collection. Now owned and operated by Singapore Orchids Pte. Ltd, Mandai breeds and cultivates hybrids for international export, and the gardens double as a STB tourist attraction. Some of Laycock's original collection survives, though many were lost in World War II. Arranged in English garden style, orchid varieties are separated in beds that are surrounded by grassy lawn. Tree-growing varieties prefer the shade of the covered canopy. On display is Singapore's national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim, a natural hybrid in shades of light purple. Behind the gift shop is the Water Garden, where a stroll will reveal many houseplants common to the West, as you would find them in the wild.

The **Vanilla Pod** restaurant gets many of its ingredients from its own herb and spice gardens, and the specialty crabmeat salad uses the garden's orchid as an ingredient. (Tues–Fri 11:30am–3pm and 6:30–11pm, Sat–Sun 9am–11pm; ✆ **65/6368-0672**).

Mandai Lake Rd., on the route to the Singapore Zoo. ✆ **65/6269-1036.** Adults S$3 ($2/£1.40), children 11 and under S$1 (70¢/50p). Mon 8am–6pm; Tues–Sun 8am–7pm. Ang Mo Kio MRT bus no. 138.

Night Safari ★★★ (Kids) Singapore takes advantage of its unchanging tropical climate and static ratio of daylight to night to bring you the world's first open-concept zoo for nocturnal animals. Here, as in the zoological gardens, animals live in landscaped areas, their barriers virtually unseen by visitors. These areas are dimly lit to create a moonlit effect, and a guided tram leads you through "regions" designed to resemble the Himalayan foothills, the jungles of Africa, and, naturally, Southeast Asia. Some of the free-range prairie animals come very close to the tram. The 45-minute ride covers almost 3.5km (2 miles) and has a stop halfway to get off and have a rest or stroll along trails for closer views of smaller creatures. It costs S$10 ($6.70/£4.60) extra, but it's worth it since it reaches areas of the zoo that don't have paths.

The staff, placed at regular intervals along each of the three trails, help you find your way, though it's almost impossible to get lost along the trails; however, it is nighttime, you are in the forest, and it can be spooky. The guides are there to add peace of mind (and all speak English). Flash photography is strictly prohibited, and be sure to bring plenty of insect repellent. Check out the bathrooms; they're all open-air, Bali style.

Singapore Zoo, 80 Mandai Lake Rd., at the western edge of the Bukit Panjang Nature Reserve, on the Seletar Reservoir. ✆ **65/6269-3411.** www.zoo.com.sg. Adults S$22 ($15/£9.90), children 11 and under S$11 ($7.40/£5). Combination Zoo and Night Safari ticket (without tram) adults S$30 ($20/£14), children S$15 ($10/£6.80); Park Hopper Ticket for Zoo, Night Safari, and BirdPark adults S$40 ($27/£18), children S$20 ($13/£9). Daily 7:30pm–midnight. Ticket sales close at 11pm. Entrance Plaza, restaurant, and fast-food outlet open 6:30–11:30pm. Ang Mo Kio MRT to bus no. 138.

Sasanaransi Buddhist Temple Known simply as the Burmese Buddhist Temple, it was founded by a Burmese expatriate to serve the overseas Burmese Buddhist community. His partner, an herbal doctor also from Burma, traveled home to buy a 10-ton block of marble from which was carved the 3.3m-tall (11-ft.) Buddha image that sits in the main hall, surrounded by an aura of brightly colored lights. The original temple was off Serangoon Road in Little India and was moved here in 1991 at the request of the Housing Development Board. On the third story is a standing Buddha image in gold and murals of events in the Buddha's life.

14 Tai Gin Rd., located next to the Sun Yat-sen Villa near Toa Payoh New Town. Daily 6:30am–9pm. Chanting Sun 9:30am, Wed 8pm, and Sat 7:30pm. Take MRT to Toa Payoh; then take a taxi.

Singapore Zoo ★★ (Kids) They call themselves the Open Zoo because, rather than coop the animals in jailed enclosures, they let them roam freely in landscaped areas. Beasts of the world are kept where they are supposed to be using psychological restraints and physical barriers that are disguised behind water falls, vegetation, and moats. Some animals are grouped with other species to show them coexisting as they would in nature. For instance, the white rhinoceros is neighborly with the wildebeest and ostrich—not that wildebeests and ostriches make the best company, but certainly contempt is better than boredom. Guinea and pea fowl, Emperor tamarinds, and other creatures are free-roaming and not shy; however, if you spot a water monitor or long-tailed macaque, know that they're not zoo residents—just locals looking for a free meal. Major zoo features are the Primate Kingdom, Wild Africa, the Reptile Garden, and underwater views of polar bears, sea lions, and penguins. Daily shows are themed around ecological issues and include "The Rainforest Fights Back," featuring 15 species including orangutans, lemurs, otters, and birds at 10:30am and 1:30pm; sea lions, penguins, and pelicans at 11:30am, 2:30pm, and 5pm; and the elephants at 11:30am and 3:30pm. You can take your photograph with an orangutan, chimpanzee, or snake, and there are elephant and camel

rides, too. The new Rainforest Kidzworld area is phenomenal; it's part water park, part adventure playground, and part petting zoo.

Zoo literature includes half-day and full-day agendas to help make the most of your visit. The best time to arrive, however, is at 9am, to have breakfast with an orangutan, which feasts on fruits and puts on a hilarious and very memorable show. If you miss that, you can also have tea with it at 4pm. Another good time to go is just after a rain, when the animals cool off and get frisky. See also the Night Safari listing, above.

80 Mandai Lake Rd., at the western edge of the Bukit Panjang Nature Reserve, on the Seletar Reservoir. ✆ **65/6269-3411.** www.zoo.com.sg. Adults S$18 ($12/£8.10), children 3–12 S$9 ($6/£4.10). Combination Zoo and Night Safari ticket adults S$30 ($20/£14), children S$15 ($10/£6.80); Park Hopper Ticket for Zoo, Night Safari, and BirdPark adults S$40 ($27/£18), children S$20 ($13/£9). Daily 8:30am–6pm. Ang Mo Kio MRT to bus no. 138.

Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve ★ Located to the very north of the island and devoted to the wetland habitat and mangrove forests that are so common to the region, 130-hectare (321-acre) Sungei Buloh (pronounced *Soong*-eye *Bull*-low) is out of the way and not the easiest place to get to; but it's a beautiful park, with constructed paths and boardwalks taking you through tangles of mangroves, soupy marshes, grassy spots, and coconut groves. More than 75% of Singapore's wildlife species are represented here, but of the flora and fauna, the most spectacular sights here are the birds, of which there are somewhere between 140 and 170 species in residence or just passing through for the winter. Of the migratory birds, some have traveled from as far as Siberia to escape the cold months from September to March. Bird observatories are set up at different spots along the paths. Sungei Buloh also has a visitor center, a cafeteria, and souvenirs. Go early to beat the heat and douse yourself well in mosquito repellent. The National Parks Board gives free guided tours every Saturday at 9 and 10am and 3 and 4pm; call for registration.

301 Neo Tiew Crescent. ✆ **65/6794-1401.** Adults S$1 (70¢/50p), children and seniors S50¢ (30¢/20p). Daily 7:30am–7pm. Audiovisual show Mon–Sat 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm, and 5pm; hourly Sun and public holidays. Kranji MRT to bus no. 925. Stop at Kranji Reservoir Dam and cross causeway to park entrance.

Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall ★ Dr. Sun Yat-sen visited Singapore eight times to raise funds for his revolution in China and made Singapore his headquarters for gaining the support of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. A wealthy Chinese merchant built the villa around 1880 for his mistress, and a later owner permitted Dr. Sun Yat-sen to use it. The house reflects the classic bungalow style, which is becoming endangered in modern Singapore. Renovated in 2008, its typical bungalow features include a projecting carport with a sitting room overhead, verandas with striped blinds, second-story cast-iron railings, and first-story masonry balustrades. A covered walkway leads to the kitchen and servants' quarters in the back.

Inside, the life of Dr. Yat-sen is traced in photos and water colors, from his birth in southern China through his creation of a revolutionary organization.

12 Tai Gin Rd., near Toa Payoh New Town. ✆ **65/6256-7377.** Adults S$4 ($2.70/£1.80), children and seniors S$3 ($2/£1.40). Tues–Sun 9am–5pm. Toa Payoh MRT to bus no. 45.

EASTERN SINGAPORE

The east coast leads from the edge of Singapore's urban area to the tip of the eastern part, at Changi Point. Eastern Singapore is home to Changi International Airport, nearby Changi Prison, and the long stretch of East Coast Park along the shoreline. The **MRT** heads east in this region, but swerves northward at the end of the line. A new MRT track, the circle line, will extend the network wider in the east and west from 2010. A popular

bus line for east coast attractions not reached by MRT is bus no. 2, which takes you to Changi Prison, Changi Point, Malay Village, and East Coast Park.

Changi Museum ★ Upon successful occupation of Singapore, the Japanese marched all British, Australian, and Allied European prisoners to Changi by foot, where they lived in a prison camp for 3 years, suffering overcrowding, disease, and malnutrition. Prisoners were cut off from the outside world except to leave the camp for labor duties. The hospital conditions were terrible; some prisoners suffered public beatings, and many died. In an effort to keep hope alive, they built a small chapel from wood and attap. Years later, at the request of former POWs and their families and friends, the government built this replica.

The museum displays sketches by W. R. M. Haxworth, replicas of the murals painted by Bombardier Stanley Warren in St. Luke's Chapel, and secret photos taken by George Aspinall—all POWs who were imprisoned here. Displayed with descriptions, the pictures, along with writings and other objects from the camp, bring this period to life, depicting the day-to-day horror with a touch of high morale.

1000 Upper Changi Rd., in the same general area as the airport. ✆ **65/6214-2451.** www.changimuseum.com. Free admission. Guided tour or audio tour headset rental: Adult S$8 ($5.40/£3.60), children S$4 ($2.70/£1.80). Daily 9:30am–5pm. Tanah Merah MRT to bus no. 2.

East Coast Park East Coast Park is a narrow strip of reclaimed land, 8.5km (5 1/4 miles) long, tucked in between the shoreline and East Coast Parkway, and serves as a hangout for Singaporean families on the weekends. Moms and dads barbecue under the trees while the kids swim at the beach, which is nothing more than a narrow lump of grainy sand sloping into yellow-green water that has more seaweed than a sushi bar. Paths for bicycling, in-line skating, walking, or jogging run the length of the park and are crowded on weekends and public and school holidays. On Sundays, you'll find kite flyers in the open grassy parts. The lagoon is the best place to go for bicycle rentals, canoeing, and windsurfing. If you go to the McDonald's Carpark C entrance, you'll find beach cafes, some sea kayak rentals, plus in-line skates and bicycle rentals as well. A couple of outfits, listed in "Outdoor Activities," below, offer equipment rentals and instruction. The park is also home to **UDMC Seafood Centre,** located not far from the lagoon.

East Coast Pkwy. Free admission. Bus no. 36 or 16 to Marine Parade and use the underpass to cross the highway.

Escape Theme Park Kids If you think your kids will pass out at the sight of another museum, Singapore's newest and best amusement park will keep them occupied. There are rides for small kiddies and families, plus exciting ones for big kids as well. The go-kart circuit is happening. They also have carnival games with prizes, plus snacks and beverages. If it gets too hot, visit Wild Wild Wet (see below). A beach and good seafood hawker fare are also nearby.

Downtown East 1, Pasir Ris Close. ✆ **65/6581-9128.** www.escapethemepark.com.sg. Adult S$18 ($12/£8), children S$8.90 ($6/£4). Sat–Sun and public and school holidays 10am–8pm. Pasir Ris MRT.

Wild Wild Wet Kids Beat the heat at this water park, with flumes, raft slides, wave pool, and lots of water activities for children. Locker rooms and food and beverage facilities are all convenient, plus water safety is provided by trained lifeguards. This park and neighboring Escape Theme Park both opened in 2003, so the facilities still feel relatively new and fresh.

Downtown East 1, Pasir Ris Close. ✆ **65/6581-9128.** www.wildwildwet.com. Adults S$16 ($10/£7), children S$11 ($7/£4.70). Mon and Wed–Fri 1–7pm; Sat–Sun and public and school holidays 10am–7pm. Pasir Ris MRT.

SENTOSA ISLAND

In the 1880s, Sentosa was a hub of British military activity, with hilltop forts built to protect the harbor from sea invasion from all sides. Today, it has become a weekend getaway spot and Singapore's answer to Disneyland. It will be the site of one of Singapore's new "integrated resorts"—hotels, resorts, amusement and entertainment parks, and gambling casinos, slated for opening in 2010. In the meantime, Sentosa is spending gobs of money to upgrade all existing facilities to meet the bar raised by the coming attractions.

If you're spending the day, there are numerous restaurants and a couple of food courts. For a unique dining option, consider **Sky Dining,** aboard a glass-bottomed cable car, where you can spend a couple of hours eating a three- or four-course Western meal (set menus S$115/$77/£52 or S$198/$133/£89 for two; children's menu S$24/$16/£11). It's especially popular on Valentine's Day or for birthdays and wedding proposals. Meals are pretty tasty, provided by the Jewel Box restaurant. For more information, call ✆ **65/6377-9688,** or visit www.mountfaber.com.sg

For overnights, the **Shangri-La's Rasa Sentosa Resort and Spa** and the **Sentosa Resort & Spa** are popular options. For general Sentosa inquiries, call ✆ **1800/736-8672,** or see www.sentosa.com.sg.

GETTING THERE Island admission is S$2 ($1.30/90p) each for adults and children, payable at the causeway upon entry or factored into the cost of transport to the island. Tickets to additional attractions can be bought as a package from the Sentosa Express office at Harbourfront or purchased separately on the island.

The most entertaining way to get there is to take the cable car. From the Cable Car Towers (✆ **65/6270-8855**) they make the trip daily from 8:30am to 11pm at a cost of S$19 ($13/£8.50) round-trip adults and S$9.50 ($6.40/£4.30) children. The one-way ticket is only S$1 (70¢/50p) less. The view is okay (but too far from the city to see skyline), and the ride is especially fun for kids. The cable cars also extend up Mt. Faber on the Singapore side. If you choose to take a cable car up to the top, you can take it back down again. Otherwise, if you choose to alight at this stop you can take a taxi back to civilization.

The new Sentosa Express opened in January 2007. This light-rail train operates between VivoCity at the Harbourfront MRT station and Sentosa, with stops at the beach, major attractions, and the future site of the integrated resort. Pick up the train to Sentosa at Vivo City, 3rd level, where you can purchase tickets for S$3 ($2/£1.40), which includes all-day rides, plus Sentosa admission.

A bus operates from the Harbourfront Interchange (near Harbourfront MRT) daily from 7am to 11pm; with extended hours until 12:30am on Friday, Saturday, and the eve of public holidays, that costs S$3 ($2/90p) per person. Or any city taxi can take you there; just pay the entrance fee after you cross the causeway, and the driver can drop you anywhere you'd like to go within the island.

GETTING AROUND Once on Sentosa, a free bus system with three color-coded routes snakes around the island from 7am to 11pm on weekdays and to 12:30am at weekends.

ATTRACTIONS The most notable attractions that you get free with your Sentosa admission are the Animal and Bird Encounters, a range of displays featuring reptiles, macaques, parrots, and birds of prey that runs from noon to 5:30pm at the amphitheater at Palawan Beach; the Nature Trail that starts from the bottom of the Merlion statue; the

Dragon Trail Nature Walk, a 1.5km (1-mile) stroll through secondary rainforest to see dragon sculptures and local flora and fauna; and the **beaches.**

Sentosa has three beaches. At **Siloso Beach,** deck chairs, beach umbrellas, and a variety of **watersports equipment** such as pedal boats, aqua bikes, fun bugs, canoes, surfboards, and banana boats are available for hire at nominal charges. This is where the beautiful young things hang out and play beach volleyball. Bicycles are also available for hire. Shower and changing facilities, food kiosks, and snack bars are at rest stations. **Palawan Beach** has a greater assortment of beachside bars and restaurants, while **Tanjong Beach** is the quietest and most laid-back of the three.

Most attractions on Sentosa charge separate entrance fees and include the **Songs of the Sea** laser fountain show (S$8/$5.40/£3.60 per person for 3 and over); **Sentosa Luge & Skyride** (S$10/$6.70/£4.50 per ride; daily 10am–9:30pm); **Sentosa 4D Magix** motion cinema (adults S$18/$12/£8.10, children S$11/$7.40/£5; daily 10am–9pm); and the **TigerSky Tower** (adults S$12/$8/£5.40, children S$8/$5.40/£3.60; daily 9am–9pm). The best attractions are as follows:

Fort Siloso Fort Siloso guarded Keppel Harbour from invasion in the 1880s. It's one of three forts built on Sentosa, and it later became a military camp in World War II. The buildings have been outfitted to resemble a barracks, kitchen, laundry, and military offices as they looked back in the day In places, you can explore the underground tunnels and ammunition holds, but they're not as extensive as you would hope they'd be. The **Surrender Chambers** lead you through authentic footage, photos, maps, and recordings of survivors to chronologically tell the story of the Pacific theater activity of World War II and how the Japanese conquered Singapore. The grand finale is a wax museum depicting, first, a scene of the British surrender and, last, another of the Japanese surrender.

✆ **65/6275-0388.** Adults S$8 ($5.40/£3.60), children S$5 ($3.40/£2.30). Daily 10am–6pm.

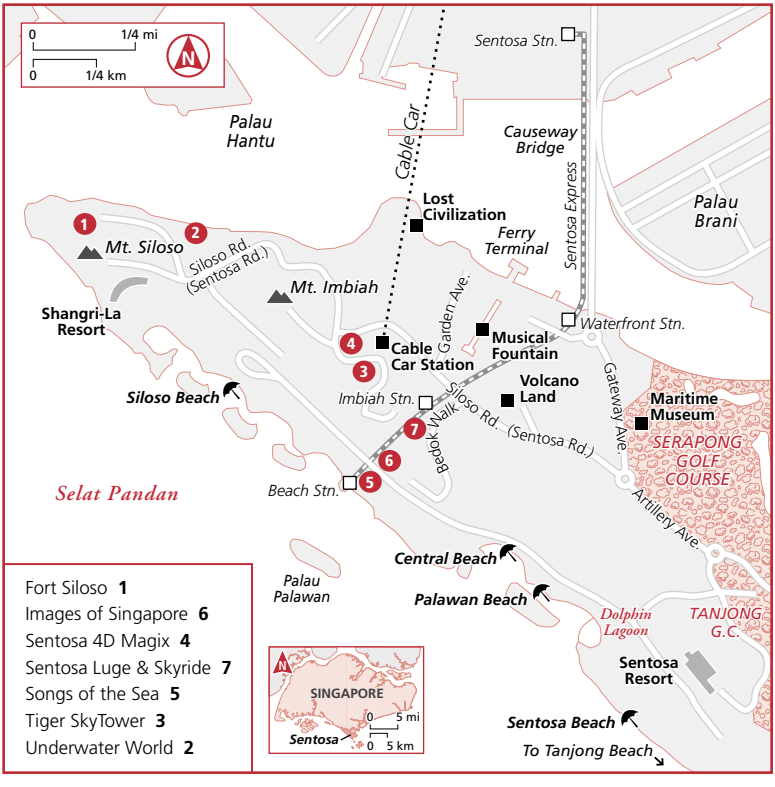
Images of Singapore ★★ This is a highlight of a visit to Sentosa. *Pioneers of Singapore* is an exhibit of beautifully constructed life-size dioramas that place figures such as Sultan Hussein, Sir Stamford Raffles, Tan Tock Seng, and Naraina Pillai, to name just a few, in the context of Singapore's timeline and note their contributions to its development. Also interesting are the dioramas depicting scenes from the daily routines of the different cultures as they lived during colonial times. It's a great stroll that brings history to life and gives a good introduction to the cultural influences that continue to shape modern Singapore.

The newest addition, ***Festivals of Singapore,*** is another life-size diorama exhibit depicting a few of the major festivals and traditions of the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Peranakan cultures in Singapore.

✆ **65/6275-0388.** Adults S$10 ($6.70/£4.50), children S$7 ($4.70/£3.20). Daily 9am–7pm.

Underwater World ★ Kids This is without a doubt one of the most visited attractions on Sentosa. Everybody comes for the tunnel: 83m (272 ft.) of transparent acrylic tube through which you glide on a conveyor belt, gaping at sharks, stingrays, eels, and other creatures of the sea drifting by, above, and on both sides. If you're lucky you might see the scuba diver who hops in several times a day and feeds them by hand. In smaller tanks you can view other unusual sea life like the puffer fish and the mysteriously weedy and leafy sea dragons. The price also includes admission to the Dolphin Lagoon, with pink dolphin shows daily at 1:30pm, 3:30pm, and 5:30pm, with an additional show at 11am at weekends.

✆ **65/6275-0388.** www.underwaterworld.com.sg. Adults S$23 ($15/£10), children S$15 ($9.80/£6.60). Daily 9am–9pm.



ORGANIZED TOURS

Although touring Singapore is simple enough for DIY trav elers, visitors with little time or those who want to delv e deeper into local sights can take adv antage of conv enient organized activities.

COACH TOURS

Tour East (✆ **65/6738-2622**) organizes typical half-day coach tours of the city every day (adults S$30/$20/£14, childr en S$15/$10/£6.80), and full-day coach ex cursions on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday to some of the main attractions around the island (adults S$73/$49/£33, children S$36/$24/£16), some with meals included. The Peranakan Trail (Tues–Sun) takes visitors out to Katong, a suburban neighborhood that is the focal point of Peranakan heritage (adults S$45/$30/£20, children S$22/$15/£9.90).

For something different, go for the **DUCKTour** (✆ **65/6338-6877;** www.ducktours.com.sg), a combined coach and boat tour in an amphibious v ehicle, a decommissioned military craft, that circles you around the Historic District for a tour of the harbor. The

hour-long tour starts every hour, departing from the Suntec City Mall Galleria, with additional transfers from the DUCKTours office on Orchard Road (at the corner of Cairnhill Rd.). Reservations are highly recommended and tours cost S$33 ($22/£15) adults, S$17 ($11/£7.70) children ages 3 to 12, and S$2 ($1.30/90p) kids 2 and under. DUCKTours also operates the **HiPPO Tour** aboard an open-top double-decker bus, cruising Orchard Road, Little India, Kampong Glam, Chinatown, and the Historic District. Pick it up at the DUCKTours office on Orchard Road or at Suntec City, then get on and off at sights that interest you along the way. The day ticket costs S$33 ($22/£15) adults, S$13 ($8.70/£5.90) children 3 to 12, and S$2 ($1.30/90p) for kids 2 and under. Call DUCKTours for information.

WALKING TOURS

Singapore Walks (✆ **65/6325-1631;** www.singaporewalks.com) is a reputable outfit that organizes guided walking tours of the Historic District, Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, and other neighborhoods Monday through Saturday, except for public holidays. Call them to find out the meeting time and place for the tour you want; for most walks, adults pay S$25 ($17/£11), children tour for S$15 ($10/£6.80). Their river walk at S$28 ($19/£13) includes a bumboat (a restored boat that once carried cargo and passengers from ships to shore) tour.

RIVER TOURS & CRUISES

Singapore River Cruises (✆ **65/6339-6833;** www.rivercruise.com.sg) operates boats up and down the Singapore River and into the harbor from 9am to 11pm daily. A bumboat ride with recorded info about the riverside sights costs S$18 ($12/£8.10) adults and S$8 ($5.40/£3.60) children. You can also use the river cruise boats as a taxi, as it has pickup points from the Merlion (Fullerton), Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, and Robertson Quay.

The ***Imperial Cheng Ho,*** operated by **Watertours** (✆ **65/6533-9811;** www.watertours.com.sg) is a huge boat modeled after the sort of Chinese junk that Admiral Cheng Ho might have sailed when he explored this region in the 15th century. A 2½-hour cruise takes you from Marina South Pier past the Singapore skyline, the mouth of the Singapore River, then out past Sentosa with a stop on Kusu Island. I recommend the Morning Glory Cruise at 10:30am (adults S$27/$18/£12, children S$14/$9.40/£6.30). There's also a High Tea Cruise at 3pm (adults S$32/$21/£14, children S$16/$11/£7.20) and a dinner cruise at 6:30pm (adults S$55/$37/£25, children S$29/$20/£13). Watertours can arrange hotel transfer with your booking.

TRISHAW TOUR

These cycle rickshaws were once a staple form of public transportation. Now they're only permitted on busy streets with special permits, and only for guided tours. **Singapore Explorer** (✆ **65/6339-6833;** www.singaporeexplorer.com.sg) coordinates regular outings through Chinatown from 10am to 7pm daily. You can either call ahead to book a ride, or just show up at the corner of Sago and Terrenganu streets; you'll see the collection of trishaws under cover. The half-hour trip takes you through Chinatown's quaint streets for S$39 ($26/£17) adults, S$20 ($13/£9) children. Singapore Explorer can arrange pickup from anywhere if you book in advance.

7 OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

BEACHES

Besides the beach at East Coast Park and those on Sentosa Island (see above), you can try the smaller beach at Changi Village, called Changi Point. From the shore, you have a panoramic view of Malaysia, Indonesia, and several smaller islands that belong to Singapore. The beach is calm and frequented mostly by locals who set up camps and barbecues to hang out all day. There are kayak rentals along the beach, and in Changi Village you'll find, in addition to a huge hawker center, quite a few international restaurants and pubs to hang out in and have a fresh seafood lunch when you get hungry. To get there take SBS bus no. 2 from either the Tanah Merah or Bedok MRT station.

BICYCLING

Bicycles are not for rent within the city limits, and traffic does not really allow for cycling on city streets, so sightseeing by bicycle is not recommended for city touring. If you plan a trip out to **Sentosa,** cycling provides a great alternative to that island's tram system and gets you closer to the parks and nature there. For a little light cycling, most people head out to **East Coast Park,** where rentals are inexpensive, the scenery is nice on cooler days, and there are plenty of great stops for eating along the way. ***Note:*** Helmets are *not* available for rental.

AT EAST COAST PARK There are several rental shops for bicycles and in-line skates along the East Coast Park; couples and families often rent tandems, too. Try **SDK Recreation** (✆ **65/6445-2969**), near McDonald's at Carpark C; open 7 days from about 11am to 8 or 9pm. Rentals are S$4 to S$8 ($2.70–$5.40/£1.80–£3.60) per hour, depending on the type and quality bike you're looking for. Identification may be requested, or leave a S$50 ($34/£23) deposit.

ON SENTOSA ISLAND There are several rental places near Siloso Beach off Siloso Road, a short walk from Underwater World (see "Sentosa Island," above). There's a kiosk at Sakae Sushi (✆ **65/6271-6385**) and another at Costa Sands (✆ **65/6275-2471**). Both are open 7 days from around 10am to 6:30 or 7pm. Rental for a standard bicycle is S$5 ($3.40/£2.30) per hour. A mountain bike goes for S$8 ($5.40/£3.60) per hour. Identification is required.

GOLF

Golf is big in Singapore, and although there are quite a few clubs, many are for members only. However, many places are open for limited play by nonmembers. All will require you bring an international par certificate. Most hotel concierges will be glad to make arrangements for you, and this may be the best way to go. Also, it's really popular for Singaporeans to go on day trips to Malaysia for the best courses.

Changi Golf Club This 9-hole walking course is par 34, and nonmembers may play at this private club only on weekdays (walk-ins okay, but advance booking recommended). They may even be able to set you up with other players. The course opens at 7:30am. Last tee is 4:30pm.

20 Netheravon Rd. ✆ **65/6545-5133.** Greens fees S$45 ($30/£20); caddy fees S$10 ($6.70/£4.50). Mon–Fri 7:30am–4:30pm. Closed for maintenance Mon mornings.

Marina Bay Golf Course This 18-hole golf course opened in 2006 and comes with a great view of the city skyline. It's designed to resemble a Scottish links–style course with 91 challenging pot bunkers. Marina Bay even offers night golfing from Wednesday to Friday, with the course entirely floodlit. The attached driving range is open daily from 7am to 10:15pm.

80 Rhu Cross, #01-01. ✆ **65/6345-7788.** Greens fees Mon–Fri (9 or 18 holes) S$80 or S$110 ($54–$74/£36–£50), Sat–Sun S$100 or S$195 ($67 or $131/£45 or £88). Sat–Tues 7am–5pm; Wed–Fri 7am–8:20pm.

Sentosa Golf Club Sentosa's many activities will keep the kids happy while you practice your swing guilt-free at one of the club's two 18-hole 72-par courses, the Tanjong and the Serapong (the home of the Singapore Open). This private club charges much more for nonmembers than other courses (and weekend play for nonmembers is restricted to Sun afternoon), but both are beautiful championship courses and a relaxing time away from the city. Advance phone bookings are required.

27 Bukit Manis Rd., Sentosa Island. ✆ **65/6275-0022.** Greens fees Mon–Fri S$305–S$355 ($204–$238/£137–£160); Sun S$425–S$475 ($285–$318/£191–£214). Daily 7am–7pm.

SCUBA DIVING

The locals are crazy about scuba diving but are more likely to travel to Malaysia and other Southeast Asian destinations for good underwater adventures. The most common complaint is that the water surrounding Singapore is really silty—sometimes to the point where you can barely see your hand before your face.

SEA CANOEING

Rubber sea canoes and one- or two-person kayaks can be rented at Siloso Beach on Sentosa, the beach at East Coast Park (near McDonald's Carpark C), and the beach at Changi Point. Prices range from S$14 to S$35 ($9.40–$24/£6.30–£16) per hour, depending on the type of craft you rent. Life jackets are provided. These places don't have phones, so just go to the beach and scout out the rental places on the sand.

TENNIS

Quite a few hotels in the city provide tennis courts for guests, many floodlit for night play (which allows you to avoid the daytime heat), and even a few that can arrange lessons, so be sure to check out the hotel listings earlier in this chapter. If your hotel doesn't have tennis facilities, ask your concierge for help to arrange a game at a facility outside the hotel. Many hotels have signing agreements with sister properties or special rates with independent fitness centers within the city.

WATER-SKIING & WAKEBOARDING

The new hot spot for water-skiing and wakeboarding is **Ski 360°** at the East Coast Park (✆ **65/6442-7318;** www.ski360degree.com). Rather than a boat, skiers are pulled by an overhead cable like a snow ski lift around the perimeter of the lake. Ski passes range from S$32 ($21/£14) per hour on weekdays to S$42 ($28/£19) at weekends and public holidays. Boat-based skiing is run by various clubs on Seletar Island—contact the Singapore Waterski and Wakeboard Federation (✆ **65/6348-9943;** www.swwf.org.sg) for information on courses and contacts.

WINDSURFING & SAILING

You'll find both windsurfing boards and sailboats for rent at the lagoon in East Coast Park, which is where these activities primarily take place. Many require membership, but the Mana Mana Beach Club rents out to visitors at 1212 East Coast Pkwy. (✆ **65/6339-8878**). For S$55 ($37/£25) an hour you can rent a Laser, or for S$45 ($30/£20) an hour you can rent windsurf gear.

8 SHOPPING

In Singapore, shopping is a sport—from the practiced glide through haute couture boutiques to skillful back-alley bargaining to win the best prices on Asian treasures. The shopping here is always exciting, with something to satiate every pro shopper's appetite.

HOURS Shopping malls are generally open from 10am to 8pm Monday through Saturday, with some stores keeping shorter Sunday hours. The malls sometimes remain open until 10pm on holidays. Smaller shops are open from around 10am to 5pm Monday through Saturday, but are almost always closed on Sunday. Hours vary from shop to shop. Arab Street is closed on Sunday.

PRICES Almost all of the stores in malls have fixed prices. Sometimes these stores have seasonal sales, especially in July, when the month-long **Great Singapore Sale** means prices are marked down from 50% or 75%. In the smaller shops and at street vendors, prices are never marked, and vendors will quote you higher prices than the going rate in anticipation of the bargaining ritual. These are the places to find good prices, if you negotiate well.

DUTY-FREE ITEMS Changi International Airport has a large duty-free shop that carries cigarettes, liquor, wine, perfumes, cosmetics, watches, jewelry, and other designer accessories. There's also a chain of duty-free stores in Singapore called **DFS.** The main branch is at 25 Scotts Rd. (✆ **65/6229-8100**). The store is huge and impressive, but unfortunately, the only truly duty-free items are liquor, which you can arrange to pick up at the airport before you depart—everything else carries the standard 5% GST. Feel free to apply for the Global Refund Scheme here, though.

GLOBAL REFUND SCHEME When you shop in stores that display the blue "Tax Free Shopping" logo, the government will refund the 7% goods and services tax (GST) you pay on purchases totaling S$100 ($67/£45) or more, if you are leaving Singapore via air travel. At the point of purchase, the sales clerk will fill out a Tax Free Shopping Cheque, which you retain with your receipt.

When you leave Singapore, present your checks at Customs along with your passport and let them see the goods you've purchased to show that you're taking them out of the country with you. Customs will stamp the forms, which you then present at any of the Global Refund Counters in the airport for an on-the-spot cash refund (in Singapore dollars), a check, a direct transfer of the amount to your credit card account, or an airport shopping voucher. For complete details, call the Global Refund Scheme hot line at ✆ **65/6225-6238,** or visit www.globalrefund.com.

Another company, Premier Tax Free (www.premiertaxfree.com), also offers GST refunds with kiosks at the airport.

THE SHOPPING SCENE, PART 1: WESTERN-STYLE MALLS

The newest and grandest shopping mall in Singapore is **Vivo City** (1 Harbourfront Walk; ✆ **65/6377-6860**). Opened in November 2006, it's Singapore's biggest shopping mall, with 300 retailers, plus dining, entertainment, and even a rooftop sun deck with a band shell and kiddie wading pool. It's conveniently built on top of the Harbourfront MRT station.

The excitement over VivoCity will soon be replaced by **ION Orchard,** which is slated to open by 2010. With a coveted location at the corner of Orchard and Patterson roads, a central MRT station below, and a tower of superluxury residences above, this high-end shopping mall is slated to be the be-all and end-all of the Singapore shopping scene. Another hot mall, **313@Somerset,** is also scheduled to open along Orchard Road at the Somerset MRT station around the same time.

ORCHARD ROAD AREA

The malls on Orchard Road are a tourist attraction in their own right, with smaller boutiques and specialty shops intermingled with huge department stores. Takashimaya and Isetan have been imported from Japan. **John Little** is the oldest department store in Singapore, followed by **Robinson's. Tangs** is significant, having grown from a cart-full of merchandise nurtured by the business savvy of local entrepreneur C. K. Tang. Boutiques range from the younger styles of Topshop and Miss Selfridge to the sophisticated fashions of Chanel and Salvatore Ferragamo. You'll also find antiques, Oriental carpets, art galleries and curio shops, HMV music stores, Kinokuniya and Borders bookstores, video arcades, and scores of restaurants, local food courts, fast-food joints, and coffeehouses—even a few bars, which open in the evenings. It's hard to say when Orchard Road is not crowded, but it's definitely a mob scene on weekends, when folks have the free time to come and hang around, looking for fun.

Centrepoint Centrepoint is home to Robinson's department store, which first opened in Singapore in 1858. Here you'll find about 150 other shops, plus fast-food outlets and a Times bookstore. 176 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6235-6629.**

Far East Plaza At this crowded mall, the bustle of little shops will sell everything from CDs to punk fashions, luggage to camera equipment, eyewear to souvenirs. Mind yourself here: Most of these shops do not display prices, but rather gauge the price depending on how wealthy the customer appears. If you must shop here, use your shrewdest bargaining powers. It may pay off to wear an outfit that has seen better days. 14 Scotts Rd. ✆ **65/6235-2411.**

The Heeren Thanks to the opening of a Singapore branch of Britain's HMV music stores, the Heeren is the big hangout for teens. The front entrance of the mall hums with towers of video monitors flashing and blaring the latest in American and British chart toppers. There is also a nice pub on a balcony overlooking the busy intersection. 260 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6733-4725.**

Hilton Shopping Gallery The shopping arcade is the most exclusive in Singapore. Gucci, Donna Karan, Missoni, and Louis Vuitton are just a few of the international design houses that have made this their Singapore home. 581 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6737-2233.**

Lucky Plaza The map of this place will take hours to decipher, as more than 400 stores are here. It's basically known for sportswear, camera equipment, watches, and

luggage. If you buy electronics, please make sure you get an international warranty with your purchase. Also, like Far East Plaza, Lucky Plaza is a notorious rip-off problem for travelers. Make sure you come here prepared to fend off slick sales techniques. It may also help to take the government's advice and avoid touts and offers that sound too good to be true. 304 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6235-3294.**

Ngee Ann City/Takashimaya Shopping Centre Takashimaya, a major Japanese department store import, anchors Ngee Ann City's many smaller boutiques. Alfred Dunhill, Chanel, Coach, Tiffany & Co., Royal Copenhagen, Waterford, and Wedgwood boutiques are found here, along with many other local and international fashion shops. 391 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6738-2411.**

Palais Renaissance Shops here include upmarket boutiques such as Prada, Versus, and DKNY. 390 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6737-1520.**

Paragon Another upmarket shopping mall, with tenants including Diesel, Emanuel Ungaro, Escada, and Ferragamo. 290 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6737-6993.**

Shaw House The main floors of Shaw House are taken up by Isetan, a large Japanese department store with designer boutiques for men's and women's fashions, accessories, and cosmetics. On the fifth level, the Lido Theatre screens new releases from Hollywood and around the world. 350 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6735-4225.**

Tanglin Mall ★ A mecca for expatriates, this mall has charming boutiques filled with regional handicrafts for the home and interesting Southeast Asian–inspired fashions. 163 Tanglin Rd. ✆ **65/6736-4922.**

Tanglin Shopping Centre ★★ You won't find many clothing stores here, but you'll find shop after shop selling antiques, art, and collectibles—from curios to carpets. 19 Tanglin Rd. ✆ **65/6373-0849.**

Tangs Once upon a time, C. K. Tang peddled goods from an old cart in the streets of Singapore. An industrious fellow, he parlayed his business into a small department store. A hit from the start, Tangs has grown exponentially over the decades and now competes with the other international megastores that have moved in. But Tangs is truly Singaporean, and its history is a local legend. 320 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6737-5500.**

Wisma Atria Wisma Atria caters to the younger set. Here you'll find everything from Gap to Nine West mixed in with numerous eyewear, cosmetics, and high- and low-fashion boutiques. 435 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6235-2103.**

MARINA BAY

The Marina Bay area arose from a plot of reclaimed land and now boasts the giant Suntec Singapore convention center and all the hotels, restaurants, and shopping malls that support it. Shopping here is convenient, with the major malls and hotels interconnected by covered walkways and pedestrian bridges, making it easy to get around with minimal exposure to the elements. It's also connected to Raffles City Shopping Centre by an underground shopping mall, the **City Link Mall** (✆ **65/6339-9913**).

Marina Square Marina Square is a huge complex that, in addition to a wide variety of shops, has a cinema, fast-food outlets and cafes, pharmacies, and convenience stores. 6 Raffles Blvd. ✆ **65/6335-2613.**

Millenia Walk Smaller than Marina Square, Millenia Walk has more upmarket boutiques such as Fendi, Guess?, and Liz Claiborne, to name a few. 9 Raffles Blvd. ✆ **65/6883-1122.**

Suntec City Mall Tons of shops selling fashion, sports equipment, books, CDs, plus restaurants and food courts, and a cinema adjacent to the Suntec convention center. 3 Temasek Blvd. ✆ **65/6825-2667.**

AROUND THE CITY CENTER

Although the Historic District doesn't have as many malls as the Orchard Road area, it still has some good shopping. Raffles City Shopping Centre can be overwhelming in its size but convenient because it sits right atop the City Hall MRT stop. One of my favorite places to go, however, is the very upmarket Raffles Hotel Shopping Arcade, where you can enhance your post-shopping high with a Singapore Sling.

Parco Bugis Junction Here you'll find a few restaurants—fast food and fine dining—mixed in with clothing retailers, most of which sell fun fashions for younger tastes. 230 Victoria St. ✆ **65/6557-6557.**

Raffles City Shopping Centre Raffles City sits right on top of the City Hall MRT station, which makes it a very well-visited mall. Men's and women's fashions, books, cosmetics, and accessories are sold in shops here, along with gifts. 252 N. Bridge Rd. ✆ **65/6338-7766.**

Raffles Hotel Shopping Arcade These shops are mostly haute couture; however, there is the Raffles Hotel gift shop for interesting souvenirs. For golfers, there's a Jack Nicklaus signature store. 328 N. Bridge Rd. ✆ **65/6337-1886.**

THE SHOPPING SCENE, PART 2: MULTICULTURAL SHOPPING

The most exciting shopping can be found within the ethnic enclaves throughout the city. Down narrow streets, bargains are to be had on all sorts of unusual items.

CHINATOWN

For Chinese goods, nothing beats **Yue Hwa** ★★, 70 E u Tong Sen St. (✆ **65/6538-4222**), a five-story Chinese emporium that's an attraction in its own right. The superb inventory includes all manner of silk wear (robes, underwear, blouses), embroidery and house linens, bolt silks, tailoring services (for perfect mandarin dresses), cloisonné (enamel work) jewelry and gifts, pottery, musical instruments, traditional Chinese clothing for men and women (from scholars' robes to coolie duds), jade and gold, cashmere, art supplies, herbs, and more. Prices are terrific. Plan to spend some time here.

For one-stop souvenir shopping, you can tick off half your list at **Chinatown Point,** aka the **Singapore Handicraft Center,** 133 New Bridge Rd. (✆ **6534-0112**). With dozens of small shops that sell mainly Chinese handicraft items from carved jade to imported Chinese classical instruments, and lacquerware. The best gifts here include hand-carved chops (Chinese seals) with a few shops offering good selections of carved stone, wood, bone, glass, and ivory chops ready to be carved to your specifications. Simple designs are affordable, although some of the more elaborate chops and carvings fetch a handsome sum. You can also commission a personalized Chinese scroll painting or calligraphy piece.

In the heart of Chinatown, Pagoda and Trengganu streets are closed to vehicular traffic and host a vibrant **Chinatown Street Market** (open daily from about 11am–11pm) where you can find a wide variety of Chinese silk robes, Indonesian batik souvenirs, Vietnamese lacquerware, Thai silk home linens, and Singaporean souvenirs—the list

goes on. The prices here can be inflated. If you're on a shoestring budget, find similar items at the market at the corner of Trengganu and Sago streets, called **Chinatown Complex,** where you may find it easier to bargain.

Spend an afternoon learning the traditional Chinese tea ceremony at the **Tea Chapter,** 9–11 Neil Rd. (✆ **65/6226-1175**), and pick up a tea set—they have a lovely selection of teapots, cups, and accessories, as well as quality teas for sale. When you return home, you'll be ready to give a fabulous gift—not just a tea set, but your own cultural performance as well. Another neat place to visit is **Kwong Chen Beverage Trading,** 16 Smith St. (✆ **65/6223-6927**), for Chinese teas in handsome tins. Although the teas are really inexpensive, they're packed in lovely tins—great to buy lots to bring back as smaller gifts. For serious tea aficionados or those curious about Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), stop by **Eu Yan Sang,** 269 S. Bridge Rd. (✆ **65/6223-6333;** www.euyansang.com.sg), where they have stocks of very fine (and expensive) teas, plus herbal remedies for health. For something a little more unusual, check out **Siong Moh Paper Products,** 39 Mosque St. (✆ **65/6224-3125**), which carries a full line of cermonial items. Pick up some joss sticks (temple incense) or joss paper (books of thin sheets of paper, stamped in reds and yellows with bits of gold and silver leaf). Definitely a conversation piece, as is the Hell Money, stacks of false paper notes that believers burn at the temple for their ancestors to use for cash in the afterlife. Also, if you duck over to **Sago Lane** while you're in the neighborhood, there are a few souvenir shops that sell Chinese kites and Cantonese Opera masks—cool for kids.

ARAB STREET

On Arab Street, shop for handicrafts from Malaysia and Indonesia. **Hadjee Textiles,** 75 Arab St. (✆ **65/6298-1943**), is known for its stacks of folded sarongs in beautiful colors and traditional patterns. They're perfect for traveling, as they're lightweight, but can serve you well as a dressy skirt, a bedsheet, beach blanket, window shade, bath towel, or whatever you need. Buy a few here, and the prices really drop. For modern styles of batik, check out **Basharahil Brothers,** 101 Arab St. (✆ **65/6296-0432**), for its very interesting designs, but don't forget to see its collection of fine silk batiks in the back. For batik household linens, you can't beat **Maruti Textiles,** 93 Arab St. (✆ **65/6392-0253**), where you'll find high-quality place mats and napkins, tablecloths, pillow covers, and quilts from India. The buyer for this shop has a good eye for style.

There are also a few shops in the area that carry **handicrafts** from Southeast Asia. For antiques and curios, try **Gim Joo Trading,** 16 Baghdad St. (✆ **65/6293-5638**), a jumble of the unusual, some of it old. A lovely antiques shop, **Melor's Curios,** 39 Bussorah St. (✆ **65/6292-3934**), is almost a mini-museum of furnishings, home fixtures, and objets d'art that will fill any Singaporean with nostalgia.

Other treasures include the large assortment of fragrance oils at **Jamal Kazura Aromatics,** 21 Bussorah St. (✆ **65/6293-3320**). Muslims are forbidden from consuming alcohol in any form (a proscription that includes the wearing of alcohol-based perfumes as well), so these oil-based perfumes re-create designer scents plus other floral and heady creations. Check out their delicate cut-glass bottles and atomizers as well. Finally, for the crafter in your life, **Kin Lee & Co.,** 109 Arab St. (✆ **65/6291-1411**), carries a complete line of patterns and accessories to make local Peranakan beaded slippers. In vivid colors and floral designs, these traditional slippers were always made by hand, to be attached later to a wooden sole. The finished versions are exquisite, plus they're fun to make.

LITTLE INDIA

The best shopping is on Serangoon Road, where Singapore's Indian community heads for Indian imports and cultural items. The absolute best place to start is **Mustafa Centre** ★★, 320 Serangoon Rd./145 Syed Alwi Rd., at the corner of Serangoon and Syed Alwi roads (✆ **65/6295-5855**), but be warned, you can spend the whole day there—and night, too, because Mustafa's is open 24 hours every day. This maze of a department store fills two city blocks full of imported items from India. Granted, much of it is everyday stuff, but the real finds are rows of saris and silk fabrics; two floors of jaw-dropping gold jewelry in Indian designs; an entire supermarket packed with spices and packets of instant curries; ready-made Indian-style tie-dye and embroidered casual wear; incense and perfume oils; cotton tapestries and textiles for the home—the list goes on. And prices can't be beat, seriously.

Little India offers all sorts of small finds, especially throughout **Little India Arcade** (48 Serangoon Rd.) and just across the street on Campbell Lane at **Kuna's,** 3 Campbell Lane (✆ **65/6294-2700**). Here you can buy inexpensive Indian costume jewelry such as bangles, earrings, and necklaces in exotic designs and a wide assortment of decorative *bindis* (called *pottu* in Tamil) to grace your forehead. Indian handicrafts include brass work, woodcarvings, dyed tapestries, woven cotton household linens, small curio items, very inexpensive incense, colorful pictures of Hindu gods, and other ceremonial items. Look here also for Indian cooking pots and household items.

Across the street from Little India Arcade, **Tekka Centre** is being renovated. This popular market carried stall after stall of inexpensive *salwar kameez,* or Punjabi suits, the three-piece outfits—long tunic over pants, with matching shawl—worn by North Indian women, plus lots of cheap Indian-made ready-to-wear. They've all put up in a temporary location along Race Course Road, not far from Tekka Centre.

Punjab Bazaar, #01–07 Little India Arcade, 48 Serangoon Rd. (✆ **65/6296-0067**), carries a more upmarket choice of *salwar kameez,* in many styles and fabrics. If nothing strikes your fancy at Punjab Bazaar, try **Roopalee Fashions,** a little farther down at 88 Serangoon Rd. (✆ **65/6298-0558**). Both shops carry sandals, bags, and other accessories to complement your new outfit.

9 SINGAPORE AFTER DARK

Major cultural festivals are highly publicized by the **Singapore Tourism Board (STB),** which will give you complete details at its visitor centers or on its website. A great source is the "Life!" section of *Straits Times,* which lists events for each day, plus theater and cinema listings. *I-S Magazine,* a free publication, promotes Singapore's clubbing lifestyle.

TICKETS **Sistic** (✆ **65/6348-5555;** www.sistic.com.sg) handles bookings for almost all theater performances, concert dates, and special events. Their website offers a comprehensive events schedule, with online booking and ticket payment. (Tickets can be picked up at the venue prior to the performance.) Visit them online or at one of their centrally located kiosks at the Centrepoint, Millenia Walk, Plaza Singapura, Raffles City Shopping Centre, VivoCity, or Wisma Atria.

HOURS Theater and dance performances can begin anywhere between 7:30 and 9pm. Be sure to call for the exact time, and don't be late—at Esplanade, latecomers are not allowed in. Many bars open in the late afternoon, a few as early as lunchtime. Disco and

entertainment clubs usually open around 6pm, but generally don't get lively until 10 or 11pm. Closing time for bars and clubs is 3am on Friday and Saturday, 1 or 2am the rest of the week. A rare few have extended hours until 6am.

DRESS CODE Many clubs require smart casual attire. Feel free to be trendy, but stay away from shorts, T-shirts, sneakers, and torn jeans. Be forewarned that you may be turned away if not properly dressed. Many locals dress up for a night on the town, usually in elegant garb or fashionista threads.

DRINK PRICES Because of the government's added tariff, alcoholic beverage prices are high everywhere, whether in a hotel bar or a neighborhood pub. "House-pour" drinks (generics) are between S$8 and S$14 ($4.70–$8.25/£2.60–£4.55). A glass of house wine will cost S$10 to S$15 ($5.90–$8.80/£3.25–£4.85). Local draft beer (Tiger), brewed in Singapore, is around S$10 ($5.90/£3.25). Hotel establishments are, on average, the most expensive venues, while stand-alone pubs and cafes are a better value. Almost every bar and club has an early evening happy hour, with discounts of up to 50% for house pours and drafts. Most of the disco and entertainment clubs charge covers, but they will usually include one drink. Hooray for ladies' nights—at least 1 night during the week—when women get in for free.

THE BAR & CLUB SCENE

Singaporeans love to go out at night, whether it's to lounge around in a cozy wine bar or to groove on a dance floor until 6am. This city has become pretty eclectic in its entertainment choices, so you'll find everything from live jazz to acid jazz, from polished cover bands to internationally acclaimed guest DJs. The nightlife is happening. Local celebrities and the young, wealthy, and beautiful are the heroes of the scene, and their quest for the "coolest" spot keeps the club scene on its toes.

BARS

Brix In the basement of the Grand Hyatt Regency, Brix hosts a good house band and international visiting music groups as well. A pickup joint of sorts, it's a bit more sophisticated than others. The Music Bar features live jazz and R&B, while the Wine & Whiskey Bar serves up a fine selection of wine, Scotch, and cognac. Hours are Sunday to Wednesday 9pm to 3am; Thursday to Saturday 9pm to 4am. Happy hour nightly, from 7 to 9pm. Basement, Grand Hyatt Singapore, 10 Scotts Rd. ✆ **65/6732-1234.** Cover charge after 10pm S$25 ($17/£11).

Café del Mar Singapore ★★★ Savor cooling cocktails while you sink your toes in the sand and gaze at the tropical sunset. Café del Mar, based on the successful Ibiza formula, is pure tropical island paradise with a soundtrack of chill grooves, just minutes from Singapore's urban center. The Sentosa island location makes for an all-night beach party—you can even have dinner here from a Mediterranean menu. Singapore's sun sets from about 7 to 7:30pm, so be sure to come early for the Sundowner Special happy hour from 5 to 7pm, with two-for-one cocktails, so you can get lit before it gets dark. Hours are Monday to Thursday 11am to 1am, Friday 11am to 4am, Saturday 10am to 4am, and Sunday 10am to 1am. 40 Siloso Beach Walk, Sentosa Island. ✆ **65/6235-1296.** www.cafedelmar.com.sg.

The Crazy Elephant Crazy Elephant is the city's address for blues-rock. Hang out amid the breezes blowing off the river while listening to classic rock and blues by resident bands. This place has hosted, in addition to some excellent local and regional guitarists,

international greats such as Rick Derringer, Eric Burdon, and Walter Trout. It's an unpretentious place to chill out and have a cold one. Beer is reasonably priced as well. Hours are Sunday to Thursday 5pm to 1am, Friday and Saturday 5pm to 2am, with daily happy hour 5 to 9pm. 3E River Valley Rd., #01–03/04 Traders Market, Clarke Quay. ✆ **65/6337-7859.** www.crazyelephant.com.

The Dubliner Singapore Located in a restored colonial building, Dubliner's got great atmosphere, with vaulted ceilings, tiled floors, pretty plaster work, and outdoor seating on the veranda. It's also a pretty decent Irish pub, with a friendly staff and a cast of regulars from local and expat drinking crowds. Sports matches are broadcast regularly (mainly soccer), and there's a variety of cold beer on tap. Hours are Sunday to Thursday 11am to 2am and Friday and Saturday 11am to 3am; daily happy hour runs 5 to 8pm. Winsland Conservation House, 165 Penang Rd. ✆ **65/6735-2220.** www.dublinersingapore.com.

Home Club The "home" of Singapore's arty underground clubbing scene, this small down-to-earth club hosts local DJs that specialize in alternative and retro grooves and indie band parties. True to its name, expect a homey atmosphere, furnished with mismatched cozy chairs and sofas. The crowd is equally funky, with a fun mix of young arty music heads. Open Tuesday to Thursday 9pm to 3am, Friday and Saturday 10pm to 6am. The Riverwalk, #B1-01/06, 20 Upper Circular Rd. ✆ **65/9877-6055.** www.homeclub.com.sg. Cover charges are sometimes levied, but include a complimentary drink.

Howl at the Moon ★★ Guaranteed laughs, this piano bar features a pair of dueling pianists who play singalong songs all night long, interspersed with impromptu banter. The audience itself becomes part of the performance, and by the end of the night everyone is guaranteed to have made new friends. This bar also hosts stand-up comedy nights, open-mic sessions, and late-night dancing. Open Tuesday through Sunday from 6pm 'til late. 2nd floor, Peranakan Place Complex, 180 Orchard Rd. ✆ **65/6838-0281.** www.howlatthemoon.com.sg. Cover charge on Fri–Sat S$20 ($13/£9) after 8pm.

The Long Bar ★ Touristy and expensive, the Long Bar is still a cultural institution. With tiled mosaic floors, large shuttered windows, and punkah fans waving above, this Raffles Hotel bar has tried to retain much of the charm of yesteryear, so you can enjoy a Singapore Sling in its birthplace. And truly, the thrill at the Long Bar is tossing back one of these sweet juicy drinks while pondering the Singapore adventures of all the famous actors, writers, and artists who came through here in the first decades of the 20th century. If you're not inspired by the poetry of the moment, stick around and get juiced for the pop/reggae band at 9pm, which is quite good. Hours are Sunday to Thursday 11am to 12:30am, Friday and Saturday 11am to 1:30am. Happy hour nightly 6 to 9pm, with special deals on pitchers of beer and some mixed drinks. A Singapore Sling is S$26 ($17/£12), and a Sling with souvenir glass costs S$37 ($25/£16). Raffles Hotel Arcade, Raffles Hotel, 1 Beach Rd. ✆ **65/6337-1230.** www.raffles.com.

The Next Page Mohamed Sultan Road was Singapore's hottest nightlife area in the 1990s, but today few bars stand out. This bar started it all, but has since changed names, owners, and locations too many times. A freaky Chinese dream in an old Singaporean shophouse, the bar's main room has old walls of crumbling stucco washed in sexy Chinese red and lanterns glowing crimson in the air shaft rising above the island bar. The crowd is mainly young professionals who on the weekends have been known to dance on the bar. The back has a bit more space for seating, darts, and a pool table. A small snack menu is available. Open Sunday to Thursday 5pm to 1am; Friday and Saturday 5pm to 3am. Happy hour daily 5 to 9pm. 17 Mohamed Sultan Rd. ✆ **65/6235-6967.**

No. 5 Down Peranakan Place are a few bars, one of which is No. 5, a cool, dark place just dripping with Southeast Asian ambience, from its 1910 shophouse exterior to its partially crumbling interior walls hung with rich woodcarvings. The hardwood floors and beamed ceilings are complemented by seating areas cozied up with Oriental carpets and kilim throw pillows. Upstairs is more conventional table-and-chair seating. The glow of the skylighted air shaft and the whirring fans above make this an ideal place to stop for a cool drink on a hot afternoon. In the evenings, be prepared for a lively mix of people. Open Monday to Thursday noon to 2am, Friday and Saturday noon to 3am, Sunday 5pm to 2am. Happy hour daily noon to 9pm. 5 Emerald Hill Rd. ✆ **65/6732-0818.** www.emeraldhillgroup.com.

MICROBREWERIES

Brewerkz Brewerkz, with outside seating along the river and an airy contemporary style inside—like a giant warehouse built around brewing kettles and copper pipes—brews the best house beer in Singapore. The bar menu features five tasty brew selections from recipes created by their English brew master: Nut Brown Ale, Red Ale, Wiesen, Bitter, and Indian Pale Ale (which, by the way, has the highest alcohol content). Their American cuisine lunch, dinner, and snack menu is also very good—we recommend planning a meal here as well. Open Monday to Thursday noon to midnight; Friday and Saturday noon to 1am; and Sunday 11am to midnight. Happy hour is held daily noon to 3pm with two-for-one beers. #01–05 Riverside Point, 30 Merchant Rd. ✆ **65/6438-7438.** www.brewerkz.com.

JAZZ BARS

Harry's Bar ★ The official after-work drink stop for finance professionals from nearby Shenton Way, Harry's biggest claim to fame is that it was bank-buster Nick Leeson's favorite bar. But don't let the power ties put you off. Harry's is a cool place, from airy riverside seating to cozy tables next to the stage. Harry's is known for its live jazz and R&B music, which is always good. Of all the choices along Boat Quay, Harry's remains the classiest; and even though it's also the most popular, you can usually get a seat. Upstairs, the wine bar is very laid-back, with plush sofas and dimly lit seating areas. Recently, Harry's outposts have been opening all over the city: **Harry's @ Dempsey Hill,** Block 11 Dempsey Rd., #01–17A (✆ **65/6471-9018**), **Harry's @ Esplanade,** Esplanade Mall #01–05/07, 8 Raffles Ave. (✆ **65/6334-0132**), and **Harry's @ Orchard,** Orchard Towers, #01–05 and #02–08/09, 1 Claymore Dr. (✆ **65/6736-7330**). Open Sunday to Thursday 11am to 1am, Friday and Saturday 11am to 2am. Happy hour daily 11am to 9pm. 28 Boat Quay. ✆ **65/6538-3029.** www.harrys.com.sg.

Jazz@Southbridge Finds While most jazz venues in Singapore adopt a relaxed definition of jazz, incorporating jazzy pop and blues rock into their repertoires, this small and welcoming venue keeps it strictly jazz. Performances change nightly, with excellent regular musicians and fantastic international greats. The place gets crowded, but people are friendly, especially if you want to talk about music. When visiting performers play, a door cover is charged. Open Tuesday to Sunday from 5:30pm until 1am (sometimes later). 82B Boat Quay. ✆ **65/6327-4671.** www.southbridgejazz.com.sg.

Raffles Bar & Billiards Rich with the kind of elegance only history can provide, Raffles Bar & Billiards began as a bar in 1896 and over the decades has been transformed to perform various functions as the hotel's needs dictated. In its early days, legend has it that a patron shot the last tiger in Singapore under a pool table here. Whether or not the

tiger part is true, one of its two billiar ds tables is an original piece, still in use after 100 years. In fact, many of the fixtures and furniture here are original Raffles antiques, including the lights abo ve the billiards tables and the scor eboards, and are marked with small brass placards. In the evenings, a jazzy little trio shakes the ghosts out of the rafters, while the well-heeled lounge around enjoying single malts, cognacs, coffee, por t, champagne, chocolates, and imported cigars. Expect to drop a small fortune. Open daily 11:30am to 12:30am. Raffles Hotel, 1 Beach Rd. ✆ **65/6331-1746.** www.raffles.com.

CLUBS

The Cannery Clarke Quay houses a number of dining and nightclub v enues, many of which ar e operated under one management: the Canner y. Venues include **Zirca,** a mega dance club with a Cirque du Soleil feel; **Rebel,** a hip-hop club with a street graffiti attitude; **Yello Jello Retrobar,** spinning nostalgic dance tunes; plus a fe w more lounges and cafes that serve a variety of styles for discriminating clubbers. H ours vary from club to club. Clarke Quay, 3B River Valley Rd. ✆ **65/6887-3733.** www.the-cannery.com. Cover charges vary from club to club.

dbl O This cavernous place with a light-up wall and dance floor is v ery popular with those who want to hang out without the pr etenses of some of the ne wer fashion-victim clubs. Two smaller dance floors within the club play hip-hop and house grooves, and the club has a rooftop terrace garden for alfresco cocktails. Open Tuesday to Friday 8pm to 3am and Saturdays 8pm to 4am. 11 Unity St. #01–24 Robertson Walk. ✆ **65/6735-2008.** www.emeraldhillgroup.com. Cover charges vary for men and women depending on the night.

Insomnia Modeled after three popular sister clubs in Hong Kong, Insomnia is named for its hours: 24/7. It's one of only a few clubs in Singapore that has a license to operate 24 hours a day, every day. A stable of bands revolve from club to club, playing dance rock, Top 40 hits, and pop to a packed dance floor . It has plenty of outside seating and also serves meals. It shares a central location at CHIJMES with a number of other bars and restaurants, so you can come here and check out a several nightlife options in one place. Open daily 24 hours. 30 Victoria St., CHIJMES. ✆ **65/6338-6883.** www.liverockmusic247.com.

St James Power Station An old 1927 coal-fired power station has been given a new lease on life as a mecca for clubbing. I ts 5,574 sq. m (60,000 sq. ft.) of space has been divided between nine independent clubs, each in a different flavor. For a cultural experience, try **Dragonfly,** with nightly M andarin pop music sho ws featuring live performers and dancers on stage. O r **Movida,** a dance club that specializ es in world beats. H ours vary fr om club to club . 3 S entosa G ateway, #01-01. ✆ **65/6270-7676.** w ww.stjamespowerstation.com. Cover charges vary from club to club.

Zouk ★ Singapore's first inno vative "danceteria," Zouk introduced the city to house music, which thr obs nightly in its cav ernous disco, comprising thr ee warehouses joined together. They play the best in modern music, so ev en if you're not much of a gr oover you can still have fun watching the party from the many levels that tower above the dance floor. If you need a bit mor e intimacy in y our nightlife, **Velvet Underground (VU),** within the Zouk complex, drips in r ed velvet and soft lighting—a good complement to the more soulful sounds spinning her e. The newer addition to Zouk, **Phuture,** draws a younger, hip-hop–loving crowd than VU. Including the outdoor wine bar, Zouk is your one-stop shop for a par ty; in Singapore, this place is legendar y. All clubs ar e open daily 6pm to 3am. 17 Jiak Kim St. ✆ **65/6738-2988.** www.zoukclub.com. Cover charges vary.

GAY NIGHTSPOTS

Singapore's gay clubbing scene is alive and well but still very underground. Bars come and go, so to get the absolute latest happenings, you'll have to go beyond mainstream media. The Web has listings at **www.utopia-asia.com**, where you'll find the best updated information about the most recent parties and hangouts. **Velvet Underground,** part of the Zouk complex (see above), welcomes a mixed clientele of gays, lesbians, and straight folks.

WINE BARS

Beaujolais (Finds) This little gem, in a shophouse built on a hill, is tiny, but its charm makes it a favorite for loyal regulars. Two tables outside (on the Five-Foot-Way, which serves more as a patio than a sidewalk) and two tables inside don't seem like much room, but there's more seating upstairs. They believe that wine should be affordable, and so their many labels tend to be more moderately priced per glass and bottle. Hours are Monday to Thursday 11am to midnight; Friday 11:30am to 2am; and Saturday 6pm to midnight; happy hour runs from opening until 9pm. 1 Ann Siang Hill. ✆ **65/6224-2227.**

Que Pasa One of the more mellow stops along Peranakan Place, this little wine bar serves up a collection of some 70 to 100 labels with plenty of atmosphere and a nice central location. It's another bar in a shophouse, but this one has as its centerpiece a very unusual winding stairway up the air shaft to the level above. Wine bottles and artwork line the walls. In the front you can order tapas and cigars. The upstairs VIP club looks and feels like a formal living room, complete with wing chairs and board games. Hours are Monday to Thursday noon to 2am; Friday and Saturday noon to 3am; and Sunday 5pm to 2am. 7 Emerald Hill Rd. ✆ **65/6235-6626.** www.emeraldhillgroup.com.

THE PERFORMING ARTS

Professional and amateur theater companies, dance troupes, opera companies, and musical groups offer a wide variety of not only Asian-focused performances, but Western as well. Broadway roadshows don't stop in San Francisco, where the road ends, but continue on to include Singapore in their itineraries, and international stars like Placido Domingo, Yo Yo Ma, Wynton Marsalis, and Michael Jackson have come to town. International stars make up only a small portion of the performance scene, though. Singapore theater comprises four distinct language groups—English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil—and each maintains its own voice and culture.

CLASSICAL PERFORMANCES

The **Singapore Symphony Orchestra** performs at the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay, with regular special guest appearances by international celebrities. For information about the orchestra, check out www.sso.org.sg, or for performance dates see www.esplanade.com. Tickets purchased through **Sistic** (www.sistic.com.sg).

The **Singapore Lyric Opera** collaborates with renowned opera companies from around the world to stage such Western operas as *Turnadot* and *Madame Butterfly* at the Esplanade. Check their website at www.singaporeopera.com.sg for what's on. Sistic handles ticket sales.

The **Singapore Chinese Orchestra,** the only professional Chinese orchestra in Singapore, has won several awards for its classic interpretations. They perform every 2 weeks, mainly at the Singapore Conference Hall, 7 Shenton Way (✆ **65/6440-3839**). See performance schedules at www.sco.com.sg, and buy tickets through Sistic.

THEATER

Most international companies will per form at the **Esplanade–Theatres on the B ay,** 1 Esplanade D r., a 10-minute walk fr om City H all MRT (✆ **65/6828-8222;** www.esplanade.com). S maller sho ws ar e sometimes staged at the **Victoria Concer t H all,** 2nd floor Victoria M emorial H all, 11 E mpress P lace (✆ **65/6338-6125**). **Sistic** (✆ **65/6348-5555;** www.sistic.com.sg) handles bookings for both v enues.

A fe w local companies ar e quite note worthy and manage their o wn per formance spaces. The **Necessary Stage,** 278 Marine Parade Rd., #B1–02 Marine Parade Community Building (✆ **65/6440-8115;** www.necessary.org), blazed trails for the local performing-arts scene after staging pr oductions that touched tender ner ves for the community, including a star tlingly frank monologue b y the first S ingaporean to publicly declar e his struggle with AIDS. The **Singapore Repertory Theatre,** DBS Ar ts Centre, 20 M erbau Rd., R obertson Q uay (✆ **65/6733-0005;** www.srt.com.sg), is another company to watch; in recent years they've staged local productions of perennial favorites such as *The Glass Menagerie* and *Little Shop of Horrors.*

ARTS PROGRAMS

A number of venues have nightly programs of performance art pieces, fringe music productions, art talks, demonstrations, readings, and other specialized arts events.

The **Arts House,** 1 Old Parliament Lane (✆ **65/6332-6900;** www.theartshouse.com.sg), is housed in the former Parliament House, whose government rooms, in grand colonial style, have been conv erted into intimate spaces for use as an alternativ e arts venue. The building also hosts an intimate music club and small cafe.

Also check out the many ev ents at the **Substation,** 45 Armenian S t. (✆ **65/6337-7800;** www.substation.org), which offers its space to smaller theater tr oupes, cinema groups, fine arts exhibitors, and per formance artists.

CULTURAL SHOWS

Once upon a time, **Cantonese opera** could be seen under tents on str eet corners throughout the city . These days, local and visiting companies still per form, but v ery sporadically. For a performance you can count on, the **Chinese Theatre Circle,** 5 Smith St. (✆ **65/6323-4862;** www.ctcopera.com.sg), has a show on Fridays and Saturdays with excerpts from the most famous and beloved tales with explanations of the craft. Come at 7pm for the pr eshow "dinner" (chicken nuggets, r eally; tickets ar e S$35/$24/£16) or better yet, have dinner elsewhere and drop in at 8pm to catch the show with tea and pay only (S$20/$13/£9).

Malaysia

by Jennifer Eveland

Compared with spicy Thailand to the north and cosmopolitan Singapore to the south, Malaysia is a relative secret to many from the West, and most travelers to Southeast Asia skip over it, opting for more heavily traversed routes—boy, are they missing out.

Those who venture here wander through streets awash with international influences from colonial times and trek through mysterious rainforests and caves, sometimes without another tourist in sight. They relax peacefully under palms on lazy white beaches that fade into blue, blue waters. They spy the bright colors of batik sarongs hanging to dry in the breeze. They hear the melodic drone of the Muslim call to prayer seeping from exotic mosques. They taste culinary masterpieces served in modest local shops—from Malay dishes with their deep mellow spices to succulent seafood punctuated by brilliant chile sauces. In Malaysia, you'll witness life without the distracting glare of the tourism industry and leave impressed by how accessible the country is to outsiders while remaining true to its heritage.

Malaysia just doesn't get the tourism press it deserves, but it's not because foreign travelers aren't welcome. True, the Malaysian Tourism Board has almost no international advertising campaign—and you'll be hard-pressed to get any useful information out of them—but everyone from government officials in Kuala Lumpur to boat hands in Penang seems delighted to see the smiling face of a traveler who has discovered just how beautiful their country is.

This chapter covers the major destinations of peninsular Malaysia. We begin with the country's capital, **Kuala Lumpur,** then tour the peninsula's west coast—the cities of **Melaka (Malacca),** plus islands such as the popular **Penang** and luxurious **Langkawi.** Coverage also includes **Taman Negara National Park,** peninsular Malaysia's largest national forest. Finally, we cross the South China Sea to the island of **Borneo,** where the Malaysian states of **Sarawak** and **Sabah** feature Malaysia's most impressive forests as well as unique and diverse cultures.

Malaysia is accessible to the rest of the world through its international airport in Kuala Lumpur. Or if you want to hop from another country in the region, daily flights to Malaysia's many smaller airports give you access to all parts of the country, and you can also travel by car, bus, or train from Singapore or Thailand.

1 GETTING TO KNOW MALAYSIA

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Malaysia's territory covers peninsular Malaysia—bordering Thailand in the north just across from Singapore in the south—and two states on the island of Borneo, Sabah and

Sarawak, approximately 240km (150 miles) east across the South China Sea. All 13 of its states total 329,749 sq. km (127,316 sq. miles) of land. Of this area, peninsular Malaysia makes up about 132,149 sq. km (51,023 sq. miles) and contains 11 of Malaysia's 13 states: Kedah, Perlis, Penang, and Perak are in the northwest; Kelantan and Terengganu are in the northeast; Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka are about midway down the peninsula on the western side; Pahang, along the east coast, sprawls inward to cover most of the central area (which is mostly forest preserve); and Johor covers the entire southern tip from east to west, with two vehicular causeways linking it to Singapore, just over the Strait of Johor. Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital, appears on a map to be located in the center of the state of Selangor, but it is actually a federal district similar to Washington, D.C., in the United States.

Tropical evergreen forests, estimated to be some of the oldest in the world, cover more than 70% of Malaysia. The country's diverse terrain allows for a range of forest types, such as montane forests, sparsely wooded tangles at higher elevations; lowland forests, the dense tropical jungle; mangrove forests along the waters' edge; and peat swamp forest along the waterways. On the peninsula, three national forests—Taman Negara (or "National Forest") and Kenong Rimba Park, both inland, and Endau Rompin National Park, located toward the southern end of the peninsula—welcome visitors regularly, for either quiet nature walks to observe wildlife or hearty adventures such as white-water rafting, mountain climbing, caving, and jungle trekking. Similarly, the many national forests of Sabah and Sarawak provide a multitude of memorable experiences, which can include brushes with the indigenous peoples of the forests.

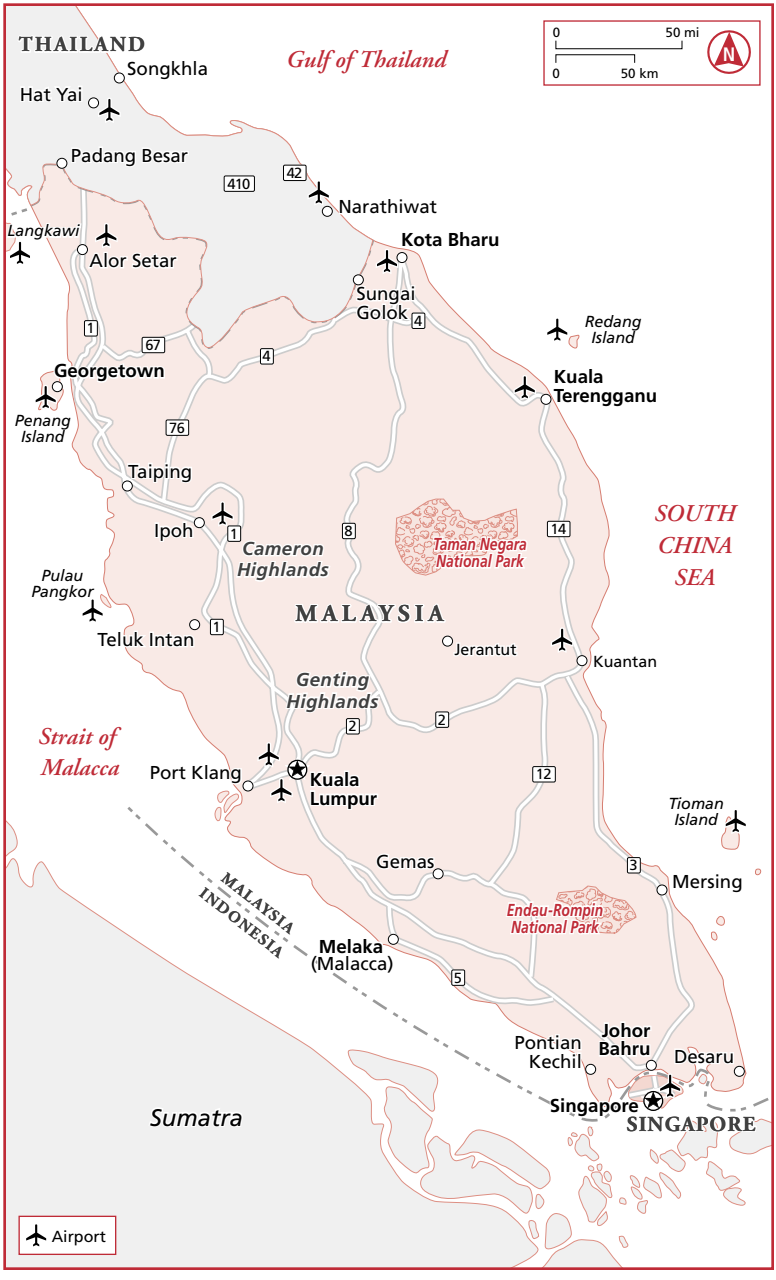
Peninsular Malaysia is surrounded by water on three sides: the South China Sea on the east coast, the Strait of Malacca on the west, and the Strait of Johor to the south; each body of water has a unique variety of sea life (and beach life). The waters off the east coast house a living coral reef and gorgeous tropical beaches, with beach-resort areas in the more southerly parts. By way of contrast, the surf in southern portions of the Strait of Malacca is choppy and cloudy from shipping traffic—hardly ideal for diving or for the perfect Bali Hai vacation. But once you get as far north as Penang, the waters become beautiful again. Meanwhile, the sea coast of Sabah and Sarawak counts numerous resort areas that are ideal for beach vacationing and scuba diving. In fact, one of the world's top-10 dive sites is located at Sipadan, in Sabah.

MALAYSIA'S PEOPLE & CULTURE

The mix of cultural influences in Malaysia is the result of centuries of immigration and trade with the outside world, particularly with Arab nations, China, and India. Early groups of incoming foreigners brought wealth from around the world, plus their own

Tips Abbreviating Malaysia

The first tip here is that people are always abbreviating Kuala Lumpur to KL. Okay, that's pretty obvious. But these people will abbreviate everything else they can get away with. So, Johor Bahru becomes JB; Kota Bharu, KB; Kota Kinabalu, KK—you get the picture. Malaysia itself is often shortened to M'sia. To make it easier for you, the only shortened term used in this chapter is KL.


THAILAND
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Padang Besar
410
42
Narathiwat
Langkawi
Alor Setar
Kota Bharu
Sungai Golok
4
Redang Island
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67
4
Georgetown
Kuala Terengganu
Penang Island
76
Taiping
Ipoh
1
8
Cameron Highlands
Taman Negara National Park
14
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Pulau Pangkor
MALAYSIA
Teluk Intan
1
Jerantut
Kuantan
Genting Highlands
2
2
Strait of Malacca
Port Klang
Kuala Lumpur
12
Tioman Island
Gemas
3
Mersing
MALAYSIA
INDONESIA
Endau-Rompin National Park
Melaka (Malacca)
5
Johor Bahru
Pontian Kechil
Desaru
Singapore
SINGAPORE
Sumatra
Airport

unique cultural heritages and r eligions. F urthermore, once impor ted, each cultur e remained largely intact; that is, none has tr uly been homogeniz ed. Traditional temples and churches exist side by side with mosques.

Likewise, **traditional art forms** of various cultures are still practiced in M alaysia, most notably in the areas of dance and performance art. Chinese opera, Indian dance, and Malay martial arts are all very popular cultural activities. Silat, originating from a martial arts form (and still practiced as such by many), is a dance performed by men and women. Religious and cultural festivals are open for everyone to appreciate and enjoy. Unique arts and traditions of indigenous people distinguish S abah and Sarawak from the rest of the country.

Traditional **Malaysian music** is very similar to Indonesian music. Heavy on rhythms, its constant drum beats underneath the light repetitive melodies of the stringed gamelan (no relation at all to the I ndonesian metallophone gamelan, with its gongs and xylophones) will entrance you with its simple beauty.

ETIQUETTE

Questions of etiquette in M alaysia are very similar to those in S ingapore, so please see "Etiquette" in chapter 8 for mor e information.

LANGUAGE

The national language is Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, although English is widely spoken. Chinese dialects and Tamil are also heard here.

2 THE BEST OF MALAYSIA IN 2 WEEKS

Most visitors to Malaysia will arrive at Kuala Lumpur's (KL's) international airport, spend a day in the capital, then run around the country trying to see as much as they can in a short span of time. We recommend that you see no more than three destinations in 1 week, preferably only two. That way you have time not just to see the sights, but to stop and feel the rhythm of local life—to eat the food, smell the smells, speak with the people.

This route gives you some choices, depending on your particular interests. It brings you to Peninsular Malaysia's most historically significant destinations: Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Melaka. You'll learn about the earliest trading ports and colonial history, and have time to shop and savor local treats. If you want to mix history and nature, the Taman Negara preserve is within hopping distance from KL; it's very easy to combine an overnight trip to Melaka with a 3-night package to the park. If you want to delve deeper into rainforest habitats, fly to Kota Kinabalu and sign up for a tour of the area's national parks; if it's indigenous cultures you'd like to visit, fly out to Sarawak, spend a day exploring Kuching, then join a boat trip into the interior to visit longhouse communities. Remember, if you go the outdoor-adventure route, be sure to check monsoon seasons with your tour coordinator. Also, for dive tours you'll have to allow extra time between flights and dives for your body to acclimate to the change in altitudes.

Days ❶–❸: Arrive in Kuala Lumpur

After arriving in Malaysia's capital city, allow yourself a full day to recover and just spend your time wandering through the city's streets. Start at **Merdeka Square,** the focal point of colonial KL. Just behind the Moorish Sultan Abdul Samad Building, in the streets surrounding the Jame Mosque, you'll find KL's Little India of sorts. Continue your walk to the **Central Market,** where nearby coffee shops can provide a place to rest. After exploring stall after stall of Malaysian handicrafts at the Central Market, if you still have time and energy, cross the street to **Chinatown,** where you'll find more shopping, a street bazaar, and the **Sri Mahamariaman Hindu Temple.**

Day ❹: Melaka ★★

Take an early morning bus to Melaka and spend the day exploring the town's historic heart. The most important things to see here are the **Stadthuys,** the history museum, located in the hard-to-missed colonial building; the **Cultural Museum,** in a replica of a Malay-style palace; and the **Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum,** located inside an old millionaire's mansion. From the Baba Nyonya Museum, head to **Jonker Walk** to wander through temples and antiques shops.

Days ❺–❻: Penang ★★★

Take an early morning bus back to KL, then board a flight to Penang. Allow 1 day for the journey. Check into your resort at **Batu Feringgi** so that when you arrive, you can unwind with a cocktail as you watch the setting sun from the beach.

Day ❼: Georgetown ★★★

Don't plan your time too closely in Georgetown. Start off at the **Penang Museum and Art Gallery,** where you'll get a brilliant overview of the island's history and cultures, and then just spend your time walking through

the streets. Attractions are all situated within walking distance, but don't rush: Take time to peek in the shop doors and snack on the local treats you'll find along the way. Just make sure you're at the **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** in time for the 11am or 3pm tour—consider it a must. Afterward, mosey over to the **E&O Hotel** for either lunch or high tea in the old colonial grande dame.

Day 8: Penang Hill

The funicular train up the side of Penang Hill was built in 1923 to take British colonials up to the cooler climate of the hill, where they built lovely country homes and gardens. Today the train still operates as a commuter service to the communities in this part of the island. Get there before 9am to beat the long queue. At the top of the hill you'll find restaurants, temples, and trails, one of which will lead you down to the botanical gardens.

Days 9–12: Taman Negara National Park ★★★

Take an early morning bus back from Melaka to KL; then board an afternoon bus to Malaysia's premier, and most accessible, national park. Hop a boat upstream to the resort and check in for a good night's rest. Taman Negara can be done very nicely in a full-board package. You'll have the chance to jungle trek, traverse a canopy walk, view wildlife from observation stations, go on a night hike, river raft and fish, and meet *orang asli* communities.

Days 13–14: Back to KL

Hop a flight back to KL to prepare for your return home. If you have time, you can stock up on gifts at **KL Craft Complex.**

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO MALAYSIA

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Malaysia Tourism Board** (**MTB;** www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my) can provide some information by way of pamphlets and advice before your trip, but keep in mind that it's not as sophisticated as, say, the Singapore Tourism Board. Much of the information it provides is vague, broad-stroke descriptions with few concrete details that are useful for the traveler—a lot of it quite outdated.

Within Malaysia, each state or tourist destination has its own tourism board that operates a website and local offices for visitor information. These are your best bets, as they have on-the-ground knowledge that's more current. For each destination below, the relevant tourist offices' websites and contact information are listed.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

To enter the country, you must have a valid passport. Citizens of the U.S. do not need visas for tourism and business visits, and upon entry are granted a Social/Business Visit Pass good for up to 3 months. Citizens of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K. can also enter the country without a visa; they will be granted a pass for up to 30 days' stay upon entry. For other countries, please consult the nearest Malaysian consulate before your trip for visa regulations. Also, note that travelers holding Israeli passports are not permitted to travel within Malaysia (likewise, Malaysians are forbidden from traveling to Israel).

If you are arriving from an area in which yellow fever has been reported, you will be required to show proof of yellow-fever vaccination. Contact your nearest MTB office to research the specific areas that fall into this category.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

You can bring into the country as many foreign currency notes or traveler's checks as you please, but you are not allowed to leave the country with more foreign currency or traveler's checks than you had when you arrived.

Social visitors can enter Malaysia with 1 liter of hard alcohol and one carton of cigarettes without paying duty—anything over that amount is subject to local taxes. Prohibited items include firearms and ammunition, daggers and knives, and pornographic materials. Be advised that, similar to Singapore, Malaysia enforces a very strict drug policy that includes the death sentence for convicted drug traffickers.

MONEY

Malaysia's currency is the **ringgit (RM).** Notes are issued in denominations of RM1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500, and 1,000. One ringgit is equal to 100 sen. Coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, and 50 sen, and there's also a 1-ringgit coin. In 2005, Malaysia ended a 7-year peg of the ringgit at RM3.80 to $1. Now, the country uses a managed float system that measures the currency against a basket of several major currencies. At the time of writing, the exchange rate was approximately **RM3.59 = $1.**

ATMS Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru have quite a few ATMs scattered around, but they are few and far between in smaller towns and nonexistent on smaller islands and in remote beach areas. In addition, some ATMs will not accept credit or debit cards from your home bank. Debit cards on the MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/PLUS networks are almost always accepted at **Maybank,** which has at least one location in every major town. Cash is dispensed in ringgit, deducted from your account at the day's rate.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE Currency can be changed at banks and hotels, but you'll get a more favorable rate if you go to one of the money changers that seem to be everywhere: in shopping centers, in little lanes, and in small stores (just look for signs). They are often men in tiny booths with a lit display on the wall behind them showing the exchange rate. All major currencies are generally accepted, and there is never a problem with the U.S. dollar.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Generally, travelers to Malaysia will never go wrong with American Express and Thomas Cook traveler's checks, which can be cashed at banks, hotels, and licensed money changers. Unfortunately, they are often not accepted at smaller shops. Even in some big restaurants and department stores, many cashiers don't know how to process these checks, which might lead to a long and frustrating wait.

CREDIT CARDS Credit cards are widely accepted at hotels and restaurants, and at many shops as well. Most popular are American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. Some banks may also be willing to advance cash against your credit card, but this service is not available everywhere. To report a lost or stolen card, call **American Express** at its head office in Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2050-0789**). For **MasterCard,** call ✆ **800/804-594,** and for **Visa,** call ✆ **800/800159;** both of these numbers are toll-free from anywhere in Malaysia.

WHEN TO GO

There are two peak seasons in Malaysia, one in winter and another in summer. Both seasons experience approximately equal tourist traffic, but in summer months, that traffic may ebb and flow.

The peak winter season falls roughly from early December through January, covering the major winter holidays—Christmas, New Year's Day, and Chinese New Year. Hari Raya Puasa, celebrating the end of Ramadan, shifts dates from year to year. If you plan to travel to Malaysia between November and January, call the MTB to find out exactly when this holiday will fall.

Malaysia's school holidays last about 1 or 2 weeks each during March, June, and August, then again from November through December. Singapore's school holidays occur from mid-May through June, and again during November and December, when families are likely to flock to Malaysia's seaside resorts, particularly the budget and mid-priced properties. I hate to say it, but I've heard numerous complaints about resort holidays that have become nightmares when guests have to wrestle to get to the breakfast buffet and suffer screaming children around the pool.

The peak summer season falls in June, July, and August, and can last into mid-September. During this period, hotels are booked solid with families from the Middle East, as this is school-holiday season for many of the region's countries. After September, it's quiet again until December.

CLIMATE Climate considerations will play a role in your plans. If you want to visit any of the east coast's resort areas, the low season is between November and March, when the monsoon tides make the water too choppy for watersports and beach activities. During this time, many island resorts will close. On the west coast, the rainy season is from April through May, and again from October through November.

The temperature is basically static year-round. Daily averages are between 67° and 90°F (19°–2°C). Temperatures in the hill resorts get a little cooler, averaging 67°F (19°C) during the day and 50°F (10°C) at night.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS During Malaysia's official public holidays, expect government offices to be closed, as well as some shops and restaurants, depending on the ethnicity of the owner. During **Hari Raya Puasa** and **Chinese New Year,** you can expect many shop and restaurant closings. However, also look out for special sales and celebrations. Count on parks, shopping malls, and beaches to be more crowded during public holidays, as locals will be taking advantage of their time off.

Official public holidays fall as follows: **New Year's Day** (Jan 1), **Chinese New Year** (Feb 14–15, 2010), **Prophet Muhammad's Birthday** (Mar), **Labor Day** (May 1); **Wesak Day** (May 9, 2009; May 21, 2010), **King's Birthday** (June 6); **National Day** (Aug 31), **Hari Raya Aidil Fitri** (also called Hari Raya Puasa/Eid al-Fitr, Sept 20–21, 2009; Sept 2010), **Deepavali** (Nov 15, 2009; Nov 5, 2010), **Hari Raya Haji** (Eid al-Adha, Nov 27, 2009; Nov 14, 2010) and **Christmas** (Dec 25). ***Note:*** Please confirm all dates listed above before you plan your trip. In addition, each state has a public holiday to celebrate the birthday of the state sultan.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for information on the major health issues that affect travelers to Southeast Asia. It's always good to check the most recent information at the **Centers for Disease Control** (click "Travelers' Health" at **www.cdc.gov**).

The tap water in Kuala Lumpur is supposedly potable, but we don't recommend drinking it—in fact, we don't recommend drinking tap water anywhere in Malaysia. Bottled water is inexpensive enough and readily available at convenience stores and food

stalls. Food prepared in hawker centers is generally safe. If you buy fresh fruit, wash it well with bottled water and carefully peel the skin off before eating it.

Malaria has not been a major threat in most parts of Malaysia, even Malaysian Borneo. **Dengue fever,** on the other hand, which is also carried by mosquitoes, remains a constant threat in most areas, especially rural parts. Dengue, if left untreated, can cause fatal internal hemorrhaging, so if you come down with a sudden fever or skin rash, consult a physician immediately. There are no prophylactic treatments for dengue; the best protection is to wear plenty of insect repellent. Choose a product that contains DEET or is specifically formulated to be effective in the Tropics.

In 2003, SARS seemed to skip right over Malaysia, but **avian influenza,** or bird flu, did find its way here, particularly in the northern state of Kelantan. The CDC advises travelers to avoid contact with live or raw poultry.

SAFETY CONCERNS Malaysia has a terrible problem with thievery. "Snatch thieves" are becoming bolder and bolder, riding on motorcycles through heavily populated areas in KL, Johor Bahru, and other cities, snatching handbags from women's shoulders. Some victims have been dragged and seriously injured. When you're out, don't wear your handbag on the side of you that's facing the street; better yet, don't carry a handbag at all. Also be careful when traveling on overnight trains and buses, where there are great opportunities for theft (many times by fellow tourists, believe it or not). Keep your valuables close to you as you sleep.

When you check into a hotel, it's a good idea to put your passport, international tickets, extra cash, and traveler's checks (plus any credit or ATM cards you don't need to use right away) straight into the safe, either in your room or behind the hotel's front desk.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE Malaysia has five international airports—at Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Langkawi, Kota Kinabalu, and Kuching, although international flights come into some domestic airports—and 15 domestic airports including Kota Bharu, Kuantan, and Kuala Terengganu. Specific airport information is listed for each city.

A passenger service charge, or **airport departure tax,** is incorporated in all ticket prices: RM5 ($1.45/40p) for domestic flights and RM40 ($12/£6.80) for international flights.

Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com) flies to six continents. Their service is of a very good standard, not to mention that they have possibly the lowest rates to Southeast Asia from North American destinations.

AirAsia (www.airasia.com) also flies long-haul flights to Australia and shorter flights throughout the region.

BY TRAIN FROM SINGAPORE The **Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM),** Malaysia's rail system, operates trains that connect cities along the west coast of Malaysia with Singapore to the south and Thailand to the north. Trains depart daily from the **Singapore Railway Station** (✆ **65/6222-5165**) on Keppel Road in Tanjong Pagar, not far from the city center. Trains to Kuala Lumpur depart daily for fares from S$34 to S$68 ($26–$46/£15/£30). The trip takes around 7 hours on an *ekspres* train—avoid the 10pm mail train. Kuala Lumpur's KL Sentral railway station (✆ **03/2267-1200**) is a 10-minute taxi ride from the center of town and is connected to the Putra LRT, KL Monorail city public transportation trains, and the Express Rail Link (ERL) to Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA).

FROM THAILAND KTM's international service departs from the **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **662/223-7010** or 662/223-7020) in Bangkok, with operations to Hua Hin, Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Hat Yai in Thailand's southern peninsula. The final stop in Malaysia is at Padang Besar, so passage to KL will require you to catch a connecting train onward. The daily service departs at 2:45pm and takes approximately 20 hours from Bangkok to Butterworth. There is no first- or third-class service on this train, only air-conditioned second class; upper berth goes for about $20 (S$30/£10), and lower is $23 (S$35/£12); the latter is roomier.

For a fascinating journey from Thailand, you can catch the **Eastern & Orient Express** (**E&O;** www.orient-express.com), which operates a route between Chiang Mai and Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, or Singapore. Traveling in the luxurious style for which the Orient Express is renowned, you'll finish the journey in about 42 hours. Your entry-level cabin is Pullman, priced at $3,240 (S$4,828/£1,620) per person double occupancy, with State and Presidential suites also available. Fares include meals on the train plus accommodations in Bangkok at the Peninsula Hotel. Overseas reservations for the E&O Express can be made through travel agents or by booking online. From Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, contact the E&O office in Singapore at ✆ **65/6395-0678.**

BY BUS From Singapore, there are many bus routes to Malaysia. If you want to travel on land, choose the bus over the train from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. Executive coaches operated by **Aeroline** have huge seats that recline, serve a box lunch on board, and show movies. They also have express buses to various locations in KL and Penang. Call them in Singapore at ✆ **65/6723-7222.** Buses depart from HarbourFront Centre at 1 Maritime Square for the 5-hour trip (S$49/$33/£22 one-way).

Buses to Johor Bahru and Melaka can be picked up at the Ban Sen terminal at the corner of Queen and Arab streets. Call ✆ **65/6292-8149** for buses to Johor Bahru (S$2.40/$1.60/£1.10) and ✆ **65/6293-5915** for buses to Melaka (S$11/$7.40/£5).

From Thailand, you can grab a bus in either Bangkok or Hat Yai (in the southern part of the country) heading for Malaysia. We don't recommend the bus trip from Bangkok. It's just far too long a journey to be confined to a bus. You're better off taking the train. From Hat Yai, many buses leave regularly to northern Malaysian destinations, particularly Butterworth (Penang). Also be warned the U.S. Department of State does not recommend that U.S. citizens travel in certain parts of Southern Thailand due to terrorist violence near Pattani and Narathiwat.

BY TAXI FROM SINGAPORE From the Johor-Singapore bus terminal at Queen and Arab streets, the **Singapore Johor Taxi Operators Association** (✆ **65/6296-7054**) can drive you to Johor Bahru for S$40 ($27/£18).

BY CAR Major international car-rental agencies operating in Singapore will rent cars that you can take over the causeway to Malaysia, but be prepared to pay a small fortune. They're much cheaper if you rent within the country. At Kuala Lumpur International Airport, find **Avis** at Counter B-16 at the arrival hall in the main terminal (✆ **03/8776-4540**). There's another branch at the international airport in Penang (✆ **04/643-9633**), or make a booking through www.avis.com.

GETTING AROUND

The modernization of Malaysia has made travel here—whether it's by plane, train, bus, taxi, or self-driven car—easier and more convenient than ever. Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia have service to every major destination within the peninsula and East Malaysia. Berjaya Air

and Firefly service some cities and small islands. Buses have a massive web of routes between every city and town. Train service up the western coast and out to the east provides even more options. And a unique travel offering—the outstation taxi—is available to and from most cities on the peninsula. All the options make it convenient enough for you to plan to hop from city to city and not waste too much precious vacation time.

By and large, all the modes of transportation between cities are reasonably comfortable. Air travel can be the most costly of the alternatives, followed by outstation taxis, then buses and trains.

BY PLANE **Malaysia Airlines** (✆ **1300/883-000;** www.malaysiaairlines.com) links from its hub in Kuala Lumpur to the cities of Johor Bahru, Kota Bharu, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Kuching, Langkawi, Penang, and other smaller cities not covered in this volume. Malaysia Airline's national hot line (✆ **1300/883-000**) can be dialed from anywhere in the country. Individual airport information is provided in the sections for each city that follow. One-way domestic fares can average RM100 to RM400 ($29–$116/£17–£68).

AirAsia competes with Malaysia Airlines with incredibly affordable rates. It links all the country's major cities with fares that on average run from RM40 and up ($12/£6.80)—seriously. Call their KL office at ✆ **03/8775-4000,** or visit their website at www.airasia.com.

Berjaya Air (✆ **03/2149-3731;** www.berjaya-air.com) operates a small fleet of aircraft that services KL to Pangkor, Tioman, and Redang islands.

Firefly (✆ **03/7845-4543;** www.fireflyz.com) has a small fleet that services some peninsular and East Malaysian destinations.

BY TRAIN The **Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM)** provides train service throughout peninsular Malaysia. Trains run from north to south between the Thai border and Singapore, with stops between including Butterworth (Penang), Kuala Lumpur, and Johor Bahru. There is a second line that branches off at Gemas, midway between Johor Bahru and KL, and heads northeast to Tempas near Kota Bharu. Fares range from RM70 ($20/£12) for first class between Johor Bahru and KL, to RM95 ($28/£16) for first-class passage between Johor Bahru and Butterworth. Train station information is provided for each city under individual city headings.

BY BUS Malaysia's intercity coach system is extensive and inexpensive, but we don't really recommend it. With the exception of executive coach services between KL, Penang, and Singapore, which are excellent, standard coaches get dirtier and dirtier each year, maintenance issues are a question mark, and road safety is a roll of the dice. Still, if you must, for each city covered, we've listed bus terminal locations, but scheduling information must be obtained from the bus company itself.

BY TAXI You can take special hired cars, called **outstation taxis,** between every city and state on the peninsula. Rates depend on the distance you plan to travel. They are fixed and stated at the beginning of the trip, but many times can be bargained down. In Kuala Lumpur, go to the second level of the Puduraya Bus Terminal to find cabs that will take you outside the city, or call the **Kuala Lumpur Outstation Taxi Service Station** (✆ **03/2078-0213**). A taxi from KL to Melaka will cost you approximately RM150 ($44/£26), KL to Cameron Highlands RM240 ($70/£41), KL to Butterworth or Johor Bahru RM320 ($93/£55). Outstation taxi stand locations are included under each individual city heading. These cars are usually basic older-model sedans.

Also, within each of the smaller cities, feel free to negotiate with unmetered taxis for hourly, half-day, or daily rates. It's an excellent way to get around for sightseeing and shopping without transportation hassles. Hourly rates are anywhere from RM30 to RM60 ($8.70–$18/£5.10–£10).

BY CAR The cities along the west coast of the peninsula are linked by the North-South Highway. There are rest areas with toilets, food outlets, and emergency telephones at intervals along the way. There is also a toll that varies depending on the distance you're traveling.

Driving along the east coast of Malaysia is actually much more pleasant than driving along the west coast. The highway is narrower and older, but it takes you through oil palm and rubber plantations, and the essence of *kampung* Malaysia permeates throughout. As you near villages, you'll often have to slow down and swerve past cows and goats, which are really quite oblivious to oncoming traffic. You have to get very close to honk at them before they move.

The speed limit on highways is 110kmph (68 mph). On the minor highways the limit ranges from 70 to 90kmph (43–56 mph). Do not speed, as there are traffic police strategically situated around certain bends.

Distances between major towns: from KL to Johor Bahru, 368km (221 miles); from KL to Melaka, 144km (86 miles); from KL to Kuantan, 259km (155 miles); from KL to Butterworth, 369km (221 miles); from Johor Bahru to Melaka, 224km (134 miles); from Johor Bahru to Kuantan, 325km (195 miles); from Johor Bahru to Mersing, 134km (80 miles); from Johor Bahru to Butterworth, 737km (442 miles).

To rent a car in Malaysia, you must produce a driver's license from your home country that shows you have been driving at least 2 years. There are desks for major car-rental services at the international airports in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, and additional outlets throughout the country.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Peak months of the year for hotels in western peninsular Malaysia are December through February and July through September. For the east coast, the busy times are July through September. You will need to make reservations well in advance to secure a room during these months.

Except for the budget accommodations, all hotels charge a 10% service charge and 5% government tax. As such, there is no need to tip, but bellhops still tend to be tipped at least RM2 (55¢/30p) per bag, and car jockeys or valets should be tipped at least RM4 ($1.10/60p) or more.

TIPS ON DINING

Malaysian food seems to get its origins from India's rich curries, influenced by Thailand's herbs and spices. You'll find delicious blends of coconut milk and curry, shrimp paste, and chiles, accented by exotic flavors of galangal (similar to turmeric), lime, and lemon grass. Sometimes pungent, a few of the dishes have a deep flavor from fermented shrimp paste that is an acquired taste for Western palates. By and large, Malaysian food is delicious, but in multicultural Malaysia, so is the Chinese food, the Peranakan food, the Indian food—the list goes on. The Chinese brought their own flavors from their points of origin in the regions of southern China. Teochew, Cantonese, and Szechuan are all styles of Chinese cuisine that you'll find throughout the country. Peranakan food is unique to Melaka, Penang, and Singapore. The Peranakans, or "Straits Chinese," combined local ingredients with

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Malaysia:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus the country code **(60),** the city or local area code (Cameron Highlands 5, Desaru 7, Genting Highlands 9, Johor Bahru 7, Kuala Lumpur 3, Kuala Terengganu 9, Kota Bharu 9, Kota Kinabalu 88, Kuantan 9, Kuching 82, Langkawi 4, Melaka 6, Mersing 7, Penang 4, Tioman 9), and the six-, seven-, or eight-digit phone number (for example, 011 60 3 0000-0000). ***Important note:*** Omit the initial "0" in all Malaysia phone numbers when calling from abroad.
- **To place a call within Malaysia:** Dial the city or area code preceded by a **0** (the way numbers are listed in this book), and then the local number (for example, 03 0000-0000). You must use area codes if calling between states.
- **To place a direct international call from Malaysia:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Indonesia, 62; Laos, 856; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

some traditional Chinese dishes to create an entirely new culinary form. And Indian food, both northern and southern, can be found in almost every city, particularly in the western part of the peninsula. Of course, you'll find gorgeous, fresh seafood almost everywhere.

Try to eat in a hawker stall when you can, especially in Penang, which is famous for its local cuisine. You'll notice many Malaysians eat with their hands off banana leaves when they're having *nasi padang* or *nasi kandar* (rice with mixed dishes). This is absolutely acceptable. If you choose to follow suit, wash your hands first and try to use your right hand, as the left is considered unclean (traditionally, it's the hand used to wash after a visit to the toilet). While almost all of the food you encounter in a hawker center will be safe for eating, it is advisable to go for freshly cooked hot or soupy dishes. Don't risk the precooked items.

Avoid having ice in your drink in the smaller towns, as it might come from a dubious water supply. If you ask for water, make sure it's boiled—or buy bottled water.

A 10% service charge and 5% government tax are levied in proper restaurants, but hawkers charge a flat price.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

Shopping is a huge attraction for tourists in Malaysia. In addition to modern fashions and electronics, there are great local handicrafts. Prices can vary considerably: There are many handicrafts centers such as Karyaneka, with outlets all over the country, where goods can be a bit more expensive, but where you are assured of good quality. Alternatively, you can hunt out bargains in markets and at roadside stores in little towns, which can be much more fun.

Batik is one of the most popular arts in Malaysia, and the fabric can be purchased just about anywhere in the country. It can be fashioned into outfits and scarves or purchased as sarongs. Another beautiful textile craft is *songket* weaving. These beautiful cloths are woven with metallic threads and are usually sold as sarongs.

Traditional woodcarvings have become popular collectors' items. Carvings by *orang asli* groups in peninsular Malaysia and by the indigenous tribes of Sabah and Sarawak have traditional uses in households or are employed for ceremonial purposes. Malaysia's pewter products are also famous; Selangor Pewter is the brand that seems to have the most outlets, with anything from picture frames to dinner sets. Silver designs are very refined, and jewelry and fine home items are still made by local artisans, especially in the northern parts of the peninsula. In addition, crafts such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) and *wau* (colorful Malay kites) make great gifts.

Fast Facts Malaysia

American Express The main office for American Express is located in KL at Menara Maybank, Ground Level banking hall, Jalan Perak (✆ **1300/886-688**).

Business Hours Banks are open Monday through Friday from 10am to 3pm and Saturday from 9:30 to 11:30am. Government offices are open Monday through Friday from 8am to 12:45pm and 2 to 4:15pm, Saturday from 8am to 12:45pm. Smaller shops such as provision stores may open as early as 6 or 6:30am and close as late as 9pm, especially those near the wet markets. Many such stores are closed on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons and are busiest before lunch. Other shops are open 9:30am to 7pm. Department stores and shops in malls tend to open later, about 10:30 or 11am until 8:30 or 9pm throughout the week. Note that in Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu, the weekday runs from Saturday to Wednesday.

Doctors & Dentists All hotels and resorts have qualified physicians on call who speak English. These doctors will come directly to your room for treatment. If your condition is serious, he or she can help you check in to a local hospital. Call ✆ **999** for emergencies.

Drug Laws As in Singapore, the death sentence is mandatory for drug trafficking (defined as being in possession of more than 15g of heroin or morphine, 200g of marijuana or hashish, or 40g of cocaine). For lesser quantities, you'll be thrown in jail for a very long time and flogged with a cane.

Electricity Malaysia's electricity carries 220–240 volts AC (50 cycles). Three-point square plugs are used, so buy an adapter if you plan to bring any gadgets. Many larger hotels can provide adapters upon request.

Embassies & Consulates **U.S.:** 376 Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2168-5000;** http://malaysia.usembassy.gov). **Canada:** 207 Jalan Tun Razak, 17th floor, Menara Tan & Tan, Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2718-3333;** www.kualalumpur.gc.ca). **Australia:** 6 Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2146-5555;** www.malaysia.embassy.gov.au). **New Zealand:** 8 Jalan Sultan Ismail, Level 21, Menara IMC, Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2078-2533;** www.nzembassy.com/malaysia). **U.K.:** 85 Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur (✆ **03/2148-2122;** www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/malaysia).

Emergencies Call ✆ **999** for emergencies.

Internet Access Although the major international hotels will have access for guests in their business centers, charges can be very steep. Internet cafes can be found in the most surprisingly remote places; but because these small places come and go overnight, it's impossible to list accurate information here. Wherever you are, your best bet is to ask your concierge or the local tourism information office for nearby Internet cafes. Usage only costs about RM5 to RM10 ($1.45–$2.90/£85p–£1.70).

Language The national language is Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, although English is widely spoken. Chinese dialects and Tamil are also heard here. See "Language," p. 529, for more information.

Liquor Laws Liquor is sold in pubs and supermarkets in all big cities, as well as in provision stores. If you're going to an island, your resort will have limited alcohol selections; otherwise you can bring your own. In Terengganu and Kelantan, liquor is strictly limited to a handful of Chinese restaurants. Pubs and other nightspots should officially close by 1am nation wide, but there are places in KL that stay open later. The legal drinking age in Malaysia is 18.

Mail Post office locations are listed in each city's coverage later in this chapter. Overseas airmail rates are 50 sen (10¢/5p) for a post card and RM1.50 (40¢/20p) for a 100-gram letter.

Newspapers & Magazines English-language papers such as the *New Straits Times,* the *Star,* the *Sun,* and the *Edge* can be bought in hotel lobbies and at magazine stands. Of the local KL magazines, *Day & Night* has great listings and information on local happenings for travelers.

Taxes Hotels add a 5% government tax to all rates, plus an additional 10% service charge. Larger restaurants also figure the same 5% tax into your bill, plus a 10% service charge, whereas small coffee shops and hawker stalls don't charge anything above the cost of the meal. Although most tourist goods (such as crafts, cameras, sports equipment, cosmetics, and select small electronic items) are tax-free, a small, scaled tax is issued on various other goods such as clothing, shoes, and accessories that you'd buy in the larger malls and department stores.

Telephones The international country code for Malaysia is **60.** To reach the international operator, dial ✆ **108.** See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 537, for details on how to make calls to, from, and within the country.

Time Zone Malaysia is 8 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, 16 hours ahead of U.S. Pacific Standard Time, 13 ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time, and 2 hours behind Sydney. It is in the same time zone as Singapore. There is no daylight saving time here.

Tipping People here don't really tip, though you might want to give your bellhop something. In a nicer hotel, at least RM2 (60¢/30p) per bag should be fine. In a budget hotel, they'll probably be shocked.

Toilets To find a public toilet, ask for the *tandas.* In Malay, *lelaki* is male and *perempuan* is female. Be prepared for pay toilets. Coin collectors sit outside almost every public facility, taking 20 sen (5¢/5p) per person, 30 sen (10¢/5p) if you want paper. Once inside, you'll find that your money doesn't go for cleaning crews.

Public toilets are pure filth. They smell horrible and the floors are always an inch deep in stagnant water. While most toilets are of the "squatty-potty" variety (a porcelain bowl set into the floor), even if you find a seat-style toilet bowl, the locals always place their feet on the seat to squat. The best toilets can be found in hotels, upmarket shopping malls, and restaurants.

Water Water in Kuala Lumpur is supposed to be potable, but most locals boil the water before drinking it. We advise against drinking the tap water anywhere in Malaysia. Hotels will supply bottled water in your room. If they charge you for it, expect inflated prices. A 1.5-liter bottle goes for RM7 ($2/£1.20) in a hotel minibar, but RM2 (60¢/35p) at a 7-Eleven.

4 KUALA LUMPUR ★★

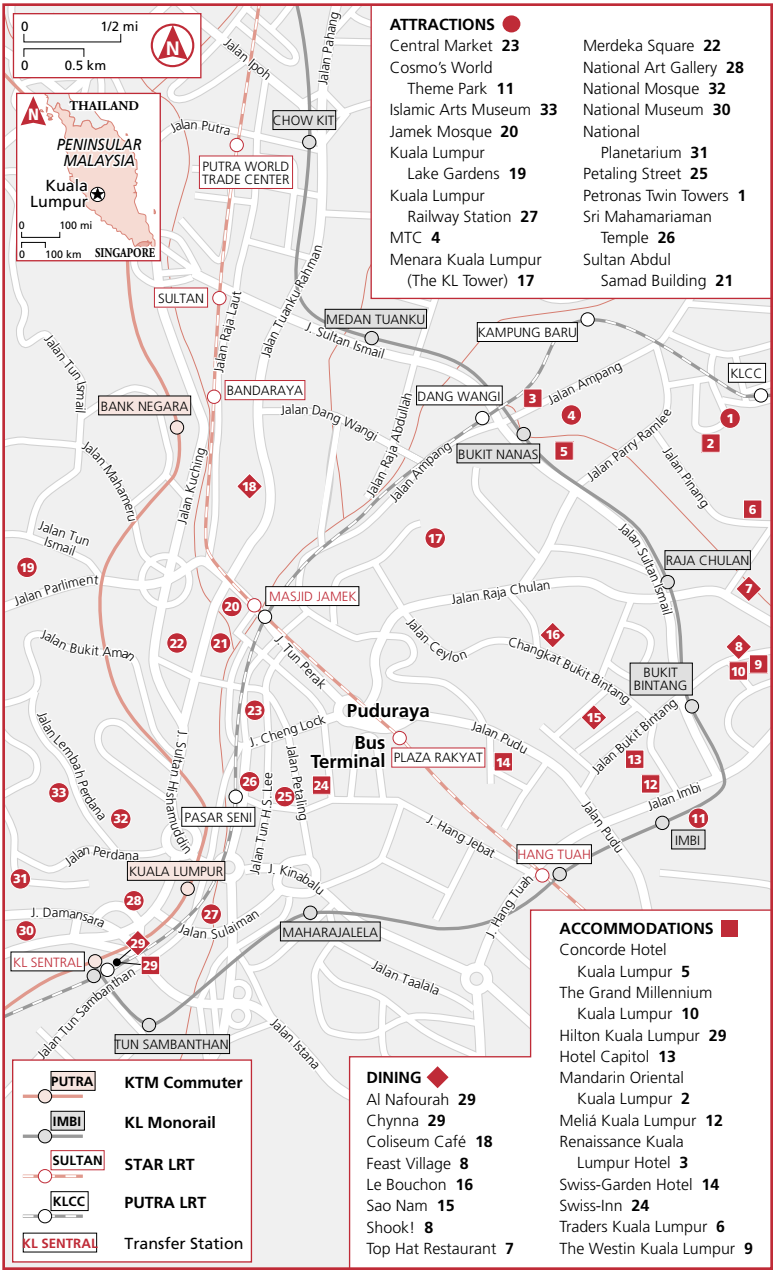
Kuala Lumpur (or KL, as it is commonly known) is usually a traveler's point of entry to Malaysia. As the capital it is the most modern and developed city in the country, with contemporary high-rises and world-class hotels, glitzy shopping malls, and international cuisine.

Today, the original city center at **Merdeka Square** is the core of KL's history. Buildings such as the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, the Royal Selangor Club, and the Old Kuala Lumpur Railway Station are gorgeous examples of British style peppered with Moorish flavor. South of this area is KL's **Chinatown.** Along Jalan Petaling and surrounding areas are markets, shops, food stalls, and the bustling life of the Chinese community. There's also a **Little India,** around the area occupied by Masjid Jame, with flower stalls, Indian Muslim and Malay costumes, and traditional items. Across the river, you'll find **Lake Gardens,** a large sanctuary that houses KL's bird park, butterfly park, and other attractions and gardens. Modern Kuala Lumpur is rooted in the city's **Golden Triangle,** bounded by Jalan Ampang, Jalan Tun Razak, and Jalan Imbi. This section is home to most of KL's hotels, office complexes, shopping malls, and sights such as the KL Tower and the Petronas Twin Towers, which were temporarily the tallest buildings in the world.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE The **Kuala Lumpur International Airport** (**KLIA; ✆ 03/8776-4386**), located in Sepang, 53km (32 miles) outside the city, is a huge complex with business centers, dining facilities, a fitness center, medical services, shopping, post offices, and a nearby luxurious airport hotel operated by **Pan Pacific** (**✆ 03/8787-3333;** www.panpacific.com/KLairport). The Low Cost Carrier Terminal (LCCT), which services budget airlines such as AirAsia, is 20km (12 miles) away from the KLIA main terminal, so be warned that it is not easy to transfer between the two terminals. Although there are money changers, they are few and far between, so hop on the first line you see and don't assume there's another one just around the corner.

City taxis are not permitted to pick up from the airport (although you will find illegal touts—avoid them), but special **airport taxis** (**✆ 03/8787-3678**) operate round-the-clock, charging RM92 ($26/£16) for premier cars (Mercedes) and RM67 ($19/£12) for standard vehicles (the locally built Proton). Vans with seating capacity up to eight can also be hired for RM180 ($50/£31). Charges may vary depending on your destination. Coupons must be purchased at the arrival concourse.



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- Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur **2**
- Meliá Kuala Lumpur **12**
- Renaissance Kuala Lumpur Hotel **3**
- Swiss-Garden Hotel **14**
- Swiss-Inn **24**
- Traders Kuala Lumpur **6**
- The Westin Kuala Lumpur **9**

An **express coach** (✆ **03/2730-2000**) connects KLIA to KL Sentral train station, where you can catch a cab to the city's major hotels. It costs RM35 ($10/£6) for a ticket, so you may as well take the KLIA Ekspres, listed below. It's faster. There are also express buses from the LCC terminal that connect to KL Sentral; they cost RM9 ($2.60/£1.60).

The **KLIA Ekspres** (✆ **03/2267-8000**) is an Express Rail Link that runs between KLIA and KL Sentral train station from 5am to 1am daily. Trains depart every 15 minutes and take 28 minutes to complete the journey. Tickets cost RM35 ($10/£6) for adults and RM15 ($4.35/£2.70) for children. From KL Sentral, taxis are always on hand and use a coupon system (about RM10/$2.90/£1.80 or RM13/$3.80/£2.35 to central parts of the city), or you can catch one of the city's commuter trains to a station near your hotel.

BY TRAIN KL's shiny new train station, **KL Sentral,** not only serves as a clean, safe, and orderly base from which to take the train, but it's also a hub for local commuter train services around the city. It's got tons of facilities, money changers, ATMs, fast food, and shops; and has an easy taxi coupon system (about RM10/$2.90/£1.80 or RM13/$3.80/£2.35 to central parts of the city)—cabs are really easy to find here. For KL Sentral information, call ✆ **03/2267-1200.**

BY BUS If you're arriving in KL by bus, be warned that different bus companies drop off at different locations around the city. **Aeroline** buses from Singapore (✆ **65/6723-7222**) will drop you off at the Corus Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, which is located in the heart of the city. KL has three official bus terminals that handle intercity bus departures and arrivals to all parts of the country: the Puduraya Terminal on Jalan Pudu, Putra Terminal on Jalan Tun Ismail, and Pekililing Terminal on Jalan Ipoh. Puduraya, the biggest of the three, is congested—both with toxic fumes and traffic jams. Taxis—another less-than-pleasant mode of transportation (see below) can be found at any of these terminals, but beware of drivers who will try to overcharge you.

GETTING AROUND

Kuala Lumpur, because of its beginnings as an outpost, grew as it needed to, expanding outward and swallowing up rural surroundings. The result is a tangled web of streets too narrow to support the traffic of a capital city. Cars and buses weave through one-way lanes, with countless motorbikes sneaking in and out, sometimes in the opposite direction of traffic or up on the sidewalks. Expect traffic jams in the morning rush between 6 and 10am, and again between 5 and 8pm. At other times, taxis are a convenient way of getting around, but the commuter train system, if they're going where you need to, is perhaps the best value and easiest route. City buses are hot and crowded with some very confusing routes. Walking can also be frustrating. Many sidewalks are in poor condition, with buckled tiles and gaping gutters. The heat can be prohibitive as well. However, areas within the colonial heart of the city, Chinatown, Little India, and some areas in the Golden Triangle are within walking distance of each other.

BY TRAIN KL has a network of mass transit trains that snake through the city and out to the suburbs, and it'll be worth your time to become familiar with them, because taxis are sometimes unreliable and traffic jams can be unbearable. Trouble is, there are five train routes and each one is operated by a different company. The lines don't seem to connect in any logical way.

The four lines that are most useful to visitors are the **Putra LRT,** the **Star LRT,** the **KL Monorail,** and the **KLIA Ekspres** to the airport.

The **Kelana Jaya Line,** formerly called Putra LRT, has stops at Bangsar (featured in the section "Kuala Lumpur After Dark," later in this chapter), KL Sentral (train station),

Pasar Seni (Chinatown), Masjid Jamek, Dang Wangi, and KLCC shopping center. The **Ampang & Sri Petaling Line,** formerly called the Star LRT, is convenient if you need to get to the Putra World Trade Centre. It also stops at Masjid Jamek and Plaza Rayat. Average trips on both lines will cost around RM2 (60¢/35p).

The **KL Monorail** provides good access through the main hotel and shopping areas of the city, including stops at KL Sentral, Imbi, Bukit Bintang (the main shopping strip), and Raja Chulan (along Jalan Sultan Ismail, where many hotels are). Fares run from RM1.20 to RM2.50 (35¢–75¢/20p–45p).

As a rough guide all lines operate between 5 or 6am until around midnight, with trains coming every 10 minutes or so. Tickets can be purchased at any station either from the stationmaster or from single-fare electronic ticket booths.

BY BUS We don't recommend travel on city buses. They're cheap but not dependable, with city routes that will get newcomers lost for sure.

BY TAXI If you can get a taxi to stop, the driver will almost always refuse to use the meter (which is against the law), quoting what seems to be the standard—RM10 ($2.90/£1.80), usually for a trip that normally costs RM4 ($1.15/70p). If it's raining, expect that quote to double. In some places within the city, taxi stands try to solve this problem. Be prepared for taxis to pull over, roll down the window, and hear the pleas from the line before deciding upon which passenger to take, regardless of the order of the line.

Taxis can be booked by phone with an RM1 (30¢/20) booking charge. Call **Cityline** (✆ **03/9222-2828**), **Comfort** (✆ **03/2692-2525**), or **Sunlight** (✆ **03/9057-5757**). Sometimes these services are not reliable.

Technically, the metered fare is RM2 (60¢/35p) for the first 2km (1 1/4 miles) and an additional 10 sen (5¢/5p) for each 200m (656 ft.) after that. Between midnight and 6am, you'll be charged an extra 50% of the total fare.

ON FOOT The heat and humidity can make walking between attractions pretty uncomfortable. However, sometimes the traffic is so unbearable that you'll get where you're going much faster by strapping on your tennis shoes and hiking it.

VISITOR INFORMATION

In Kuala Lumpur, Tourism Malaysia has several offices. The largest is at the **MTC,** the **Malaysia Tourist Centre** (see "What to See & Do," later in this chapter), located on 109 Jalan Ampang (✆ **03/2164-3929**) and open daily from 8am to 10:30pm. In addition to a tourist information desk, MTC also has a money changer; ATM; tourist police post; travel agent booking for Taman Negara trips, city tours, and limited hotel bookings; souvenir shops; an amphitheater; and Transnasional bus ticket bookings.

Vision KL Magazine is offered for free in many hotel rooms and has listings for events in KL and Malaysia. At newsstands it costs RM6.80 ($2/£1.25). The monthly *Time Out* is a more comprehensive alternative.

Fast Facts Kuala Lumpur

American Express The main office for American Express is in KL at Menara Maybank, Ground Level banking hall, Jalan Perak (✆ **1300/886-688**).

Currency Exchange You'll find headquarters for all Malaysian and many international banks, most of which have outlets along Jalan Sultan Ismail, plus ATMs at

countless locations throughout the city. Look for money changers in just about every shopping mall; they're a better bargain than banks or hotel cashiers.

Emergencies If you have a medical, police, or fire emergency, the number to dial is ✆ **999.**

Internet Access Internet service in KL will run about RM3 to RM6 (90¢–$1.70/50p–£1) per hour. Internet cafes come and go, popping up in back packer areas such as Chinatown and the streets around BB Plaza off Jalan Bukit Bintang.

Mail KL's general post office, on Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin in the enormous Pos Malaysia Komplex Dayabumi (✆ **03/2274-1122**), can be pretty overwhelming. Try to use your hotel's mail service for a much easier time.

Telephones The area code for Kuala Lumpur is **03.** The city's phone numbers have an eight-digit format. Numbers in the rest of the country have seven digits.

WHERE TO STAY

The hotels listed below represent only those properties that are best for leisure travelers. Even the very expensive hotels listed have qualities that extend beyond the business center. If you plan to travel to KL in July or August and want to stay in an upmarket hotel, you'll need to book your room well in advance. KL's superpeak season falls during these months, when travelers from the Middle East take a break from scorching temperatures back home.

Very Expensive

The Grand Millennium Kuala Lumpur ★ One of the best five-star properties in Kuala Lumpur, this landmark along KL's fashionable Jalan Bukit Bintang shopping strip has an ever-bustling lobby to match the excitement along the sidewalks outside. Surprisingly, the staff always seems polite and professional despite the barrage. The guest rooms are spacious, quiet, and cool, with huge plush beds. Bathrooms are large, marble affairs with plenty of counter space. The outdoor pool is a palm-lined free-form escape, and the fitness center is state-of-the-art, with sauna, steam, spa, and Jacuzzi. Pavilion Kuala Lumpur, the city's smart new shopping mall, adjoins the hotel, and while some construction is still ongoing, disturbance to hotel guests is minimal. Nght owls should enjoy the lively entertainment in the hotel's Pulse bar and nightclub.

160 Jalan Bukit Bintang, 55100 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **866/866-8066** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/124-420 in Australia, 800/808-228 in New Zealand, 800/414-741 in the U.K., or 03/2117-4888. Fax 03/2117-1441. www.millenniumhotels.com. 468 units. RM750 ($218/£136) double; from RM1,450 ($421/£263) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Bukit Bintang Monorail station. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; outdoor pool; 2 squash courts; 24-hr. fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur ★★★ The glistening Petronas Twin Towers are the iconic KL landmarks, and its neighbor, the Mandarin Oriental, has the best views. The hotel has set the benchmark for hospitality standards in the city and is popular with corporate clients who receive the finest treatment on club floors and arguably the best club lounge in KL. The guest rooms' best-selling feature is the view of the city on one

side of the hotel and the park on the other; specify at the time of booking if you have a preference. Rooms are stately with good-quality furnishings, marble bathrooms, and a hint of Oriental ambience. We love the views from the panoramic windows of the 24th-floor lounge—arrive about 6:45pm when the twin tower lights are turned on. The 10-year-old hotel (and the rooms) is due for a renovation, but its service and guest recognition are outstanding. Dine in the new seafood outlet, Pacifica, or in the old Shanghai surroundings of Lai Po Heen. At night, Sultan Lounge turns into the local hot spot.

Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC), 50088 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **866/526-6567** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/123-693 in Australia, 800/2828-3838 in New Zealand, 800/2828-3838 in the U.K., or 03/2380-888. Fax 03/2380-8833. www.mandarinoriental.com. 643 units. RM510 ($148/£93) double; from RM2,173 ($630/£391) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 2-min walk to KLCC and the Convention Center. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge; cigar divan; outdoor pool; tennis courts; squash courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi; steam room and sauna; spa; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; dry cleaning; babysitting; club floors and lounge; meeting facilities. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, butler service if required, hair dryer, safe.

Expensive

Hilton Kuala Lumpur ★★★ This is the hottest hotel in KL. From the airy, art-filled public spaces to the compact rooftop lagoon pool, everything is done with edgy style and sophistication. Large rooms have sleek contemporary decor, with a desk area wired for work, mood lighting, stocked minibar with a coffee plunger and heavy mugs, and a 42-inch plasma TV. A "magic button" handles all service requests, and three "lifestyle boxes" provide extras such as desk accessories, bath treats, and games. Bathrooms are great; they have deep tubs, wide "rain" showerheads, and a mini LCD screen TV built into the shaving mirror. The hotel's fitness center is operated by the very competent Clarke Hatch company, and the rooftop pool and Balinese-inspired spa are great escapes.

3 Jalan Stesen Sentral, 50470 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **800/HILTONS** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/445-8667 in Australia, 300/445-866 in New Zealand, 800/448-002 in the U.K., or 03/2264-2264. Fax 03/2264-2266. www.hilton.com. 510 units. RM466 ($135/£84) double; from RM830 ($241/£150) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Opposite KL Sentral station. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Renaissance Kuala Lumpur Hotel ★ (Value) The Renaissance offers terrific value for money. It has two wings: the posh West Wing and the modern East Wing, and both share hotel facilities. Each wing has its own entrance, connected in the middle where the ballroom and banquet rooms are housed. Guest rooms in the West Wing have a European feel to them, while the East Wing is contemporary, with simpler decor, but is no less comfortable. The enormous outdoor pool, which sits between the two hotel towers, is one of the biggest in the city.

Corner of Jalan Sultan Ismail and Jalan Ampang, 50450 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **800/HOTELS-1** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/251-259 in Australia, 800/441-035 in New Zealand, or 03/2162-2233. Fax 03/2163-1122. www.marriott.com. West Wing: RM695 ($202/£125) double; from RM1,800 ($522/£324) suite. East Wing: RM645 ($187/£116) double; from RM1,250 ($363/£225) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Bukit Nanas Monorail and Dang Wangi LRT stations. **Amenities:** 9 restaurants and bars; large landscaped outdoor pool; outdoor lighted tennis court; fitness center w/sauna and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Traders Kuala Lumpur ★ Traders is a little deceptive in that it is supposed to be a four-star Shangri-La, but this centrally located hotel packs a punch bigger than its humble rating. It overlooks the Twin Towers and has magical evening views of floodlight icons and the associated parklands. It adjoins the Convention Center, and golf carts ferry guests to and from the towers and the shopping paradise found at their base. SkyBar on the hotel's 33rd floor is our favorite nightspot in KL, with unsurpassed aerial views of the city skyline. The contemporary style of the guest rooms may feel spartan to some or refreshingly uncluttered to others. Only 2 years old, this hotel has everything business travelers need, and its location makes it popular with conference delegates and leisure travelers.

Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC), 50088 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **866/656-5050** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, 800/028-3337 in the U.K., or 03/2332-9888. Fax 03/2332-2667. www.tradershotels.com. 571 units. RM400 ($116/£72) double; from RM725 ($210/£131) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Brisk 10-min. walk to the Twin Towers and 15-min. walk to Bintang Walk. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; semi-enclosed pool; jogging track around adjoining parklands; fitness center; sauna; Jacuzzi; steam bath; spa; business center; club lounge w/panoramic views. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

The Westin Kuala Lumpur ★★ The Westin is no ordinary hotel. Its sensory approach to hospitality is obvious the minute you enter from busy Bintang Walk and notice the aromatherapy candles, the fruit-flavored welcome drinks, and the mood of the music. There is a trendy vibe to everything from restaurants to bars, and the rooms are contemporary, functional (large writing desks), and welcoming (the signature Heavenly Bed). The buffet breakfast is easily the region's best. EEST serves a wide array of Asian cuisines, and Qba features live salsa bands almost every night.

199 Jalan Bukit Bintang, 55100 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **800/937-8461** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/656-535 in Australia, 800/490-375 in New Zealand, 800/325-95959 in the U.K., or 03/2731-8333. Fax 03/2773 8087. www.westin.com/kualalumpur. 443 units. RM980 ($284/£176) double; from RM1,530 ($444/£275) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min walk to monorail station, right at the doorstep to the restaurants, bars, and entertainment of Bintang Walk. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; retail and gourmet market; outdoor pool; fitness center; business center; meeting facilities; limousine service; laundry; room service; club floor and lounge. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, work table, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Moderate

Concorde Hotel Kuala Lumpur ★★ Value Concorde is one of my favorites in this price category for its central location and quality accommodations at an incredible price. Although rooms are not as large as those in more expensive hotels, they're well outfitted with desks, side chairs, comfortable beds, and tidy bathrooms. A recent renovation has made them more stylish. Concorde has a small outdoor pool with a charming cafe and small fitness center. The lobby lounge is noisy at night because it's popular. Hard Rock Cafe is also on the premises.

2 Jalan Sultan Ismail, 50250 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **03/2144-2200.** Fax 03/2144-1628. www.concorde.net/kl. 570 units. RM330 ($96/£60) double; from RM1,360 ($394/£247) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Bukit Nanas Monorail station and 10-min. walk to Dang Wangi LRT station. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge and Hard Rock Cafe; small outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna, steam room, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

Meliá Kuala Lumpur ★ Value This hotel is located next to a KL Monorail station and across the street from the mind-bogglingly enormous Times Square shopping and entertainment complex, making it an appealing option for visitors. The small lobby is

functional, with space for tour gr oups and a v ery active and efficient tour desk. G uest rooms have light wood furnishings, contemporar y fixtures, wall desks with a swiv el arm for extra space, and big-scr een TVs. Bathrooms, although small, are well maintained with good counter space. Mealtimes in the hotel's coffee shop can be a little cr owded.

16 Jalan Imbi, 55100 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **888/33-MELIA** (63542) in the U.S. and Canada, 800/962-720 in the U.K., or 03/2785-2828. F ax 03/2785-2800. w ww.solmelia.com. 300 units . RM435 ($126/£79) double; fr om RM1,200 ($348/£218) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Imbi Monorail station. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar and karaoke lounge; small out door pool; health c enter w/massage; t our desk; small business c enter; shopping ar cade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house mo vies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, iron.

Swiss-Garden Hotel Swiss-Garden offers r eliable comfor t, an okay location, and affordability that attracts many leisure travelers. It also knows how to make you feel right at home, with a friendly staff and a hotel lobb y bar that actually gets patr onized. The guest rooms are decorated in warm earthy tones. Swiss-Garden is within walking distance from KL's lively Chinatown district, and close to the Puduraya bus station (which unfortunately makes traffic ugly at r ush hour). Facilities include an outdoor pool, a small spa, an e-lounge, a new ecocafe, and a fitness center.

117 Jalan Pudu, 55100 Kuala Lumpur. ✆ **03/2141-3333.** Fax 03/2141-5555. www.swissgarden.com. 310 units. RM450 ($131/£82) double; from RM800 ($232/£145) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby lounge; small out door pool; small fitness c enter; spa w/massage; c oncierge; limousine ser vice; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Inexpensive

Hotel Capitol ★ Value A top pick for a budget hotel, Capitol is located in a liv ely part of the city's popular G olden Triangle district, close to the junction of J alan Sultan Ismail and J alan Bukit Bintang. In the surr ounding lanes y ou'll find small eateries and shops for necessities, and shopping malls ar e close by. The place has a minimalist lobb y that's function o ver frills. I nside the guest r ooms, the wooden furnitur e seems like it 's been around awhile, but the upholster y, bedding, carpeting, and drapes all seem fr esh. The big tiled bathroom also has a long bathtub. There are no leisure facilities to speak of, but if you've come to KL to sightsee, y ou won't miss them.

Jalan Bulan, off Jalan Buk it Bintang, 55100 K uala L umpur. ✆ **800/448-8355** in the U .S. and C anada, 800/221-176 in A ustralia, or 03/2143-7000. F ax 03/2143-0000. w ww.capitol.com.my/index.html. 225 units. RM250 ($73/£45) double. AE, DC, MC, V. 5-min. walk to Bintang Monorail station. **Amenities:** Restaurant; r oom ser vice; same -day laundr y ser vice; nonsmok ing r ooms. *In r oom:* A/C, sat ellite TV, high-speed Internet access, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Swiss-Inn This tiny hotel is popular with budget trav elers. Tucked away in the heart of Chinatown, Swiss-Inn's best asset is its location, amid the jumble of vibrant night-mar ket hawkers. The place is small, but a new contemporary west wing has 41 rooms with 26-inch LCD TVs and smar t bathrooms. Higher-priced r ooms have a small window, a bit mor e space (but are still compact), and are somewhat better maintained. Budget rooms, on lower floors, are very small, the cheapest having no windows at all. Room categories are superior, deluxe, and family, and they often have good promotional rates. Make sure you reserve your room early because this place runs at high occupancy year-round. The cafe, hidden behind market stalls, is an inter esting place to have a beer and people-watch.

62 Jalan Sultan, 50000 K uala Lumpur. ✆ **03/2072-3333.** Fax 03/2031-6699. www.swissinnkualalumpur.com. 110 units. RM295 ($86/£53) double . AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 r estaurants; laundry ser vice; dr y cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; Internet kiosks (extra charge). *In room:* A/C, TV, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer.

Kuala Lumpur, like Singapore, is very cosmopolitan. Here you'll find not only delicious and exotic cuisine, but also some pretty trendy settings.

Al Nafourah ★★★ LEBANESE Al Nafourah drips with the magical allure of a desert oasis. With Moorish arches, twinkling lanterns, carved screens, silken hangings, mosaic tiles, and woven carpets throughout, the restaurant also has booths in private nooks for extra romance. The Lebanese cuisine is some of the best around, with lamb, chicken, and fish dishes in tangy herbs and warm flatbreads straight from a wood-fire oven. Outside on the terrace, sit back and drink a heady coffee and smoke from a hookah while taking in belly dance performances. A truly memorable evening.

Le Meridien Kuala Lumpur, 2 Jalan Stesen Sentral. ✆ **03/2263-7888.** Reservations recommended. Main courses RM48–RM128 ($14–$37/£8.65–£23). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Chynna ★★ CANTONESE Chynna is pure dinner theater: From the Madam Wong–style red lanterns to the Old China antique replica furnishings, you'll think you're in a highly stylized Shanghai of yesteryear. For fun, there's a show kitchen where you can watch delectable dim sum being prepared, or you can just sit at your table and watch the tea master refill your cup with long-stem tea pourers and acrobatic moves. The delicious lunch dim sum menu is extensive, with most dishes between RM8 and RM12 ($2.30–$3.50/£1.45–£2.20). Dinner is standard Cantonese fare, but expensive, with a menu of soups and rice and noodle dishes.

Hilton Kuala Lumpur, 3 Jalan Stesen Sentral. ✆ **03/2264-2264.** Reservations recommended. Small dishes RM28–RM56 ($8.10–$16/£5–£10). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Coliseum Cafe Finds WESTERN/LOCAL The place is 90 years old—and so is the staff—and is KL's authentic "greasy spoon." It sounds dreadful, but the place is legendary. It used to be *the* place for the starched-shirt colonial types to get real Western food back in the day. Now it's a favorite with the locals, who come for enormous sizzling steaks, baked crabmeat served in the shell, and the house favorite caramel custard pudding. The food is quite nice, and the prices are terrific for the steaks, which we highly recommend.

98–100 Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman. ✆ **03/2692-6270.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses RM20–RM60 ($5.80–$17/£3.65–£11). MC. Daily 8am–10pm.

Feast Village ★★ INTERNATIONAL Located in the basement of Starhill Gallery, an exclusive shopping mall, Feast Village isn't a single restaurant, but a cluster of 13 arranged like a small Malay village. As you stroll along stone and timber pathways, you'll pass cafes that serve seafood, steaks, Malay, Chinese, Thai, Korean, Indian, and more. Within each cafe, the menu is unique and so is the decor. Shook! stands out for its Japanese, Chinese, and Western offerings.

Basement, Starhill Gallery, 181 Jalan Bukit Bintang. ✆ **03/2782-3800.** Main courses vary in price from outlet to outlet. AE, DC, MC, V. Most outlets daily noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

Le Bouchon ★★ FRENCH This cozy French provincial restaurant along the bar and restaurant street of Changkat Bukit Bintang is a longtime favorite with KL's French community. Try the *terrine de foie gras* and ox tongue. The wines are excellent and reasonably priced considering the quality. The restaurant is French owned and managed, and while the food and wines are first class, there's still an unpretentious ambience.

14 and 16 Changkat Bukit Bintang. ✆ **03/2142-7633.** Reservations recommended. Main courses RM40–RM120 ($12–$35/£7.20–£22). AE, DC, MC, V. Lunch Tues–Fri noon–2pm; dinner daily 7–10:30pm.

Sao Nam ★ VIETNAMESE One of Asia's great restaurants, Sao Nam has colorful decor with revolutionary posters on ocher walls. The power tables are at the courtyard entrance. The food is authentic, fresh, and full of twists and surprises. Try the mangosteen and prawn salad, but order it when you book your reservation, as they sell out fast. For starters try the sample plate and move on to curries, noodle soup, and crispy pancakes and duck in orange sauce. The wines are good and reasonably priced.

25 Tengkat Tong Shin. ✆ **03/2144-1225.** Reservations essential. Main courses RM22–RM32 ($6.40–$9.30/£4–£5.80). AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun noon–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm. Closed Mon.

Top Hat Restaurant ★★★ Finds ASIAN FUSION In a 1930s bungalow that was once a school, this place winds through room after room, its walls painted in bright hues and furnished with an assortment of mix-and-matched teak tables, chairs, and antiques. The menu is fabulous. While a la carte is available, Top Hat puts together set meals featuring Nyonya, Melaka Portuguese, traditional Malay, Thai, Western, and even vegetarian recipes. They're all brilliant. Desserts are huge and sinful. There's a sampler dish for those who can't decide.

No. 7 Jalan Kia Peng. ✆ **03/2142-8611.** Reservations recommended. Main courses RM30–RM65 ($8.70–$19/£5.40–£12). Set meals RM30–RM100 ($8.70–$28/£5.40–£18). AE, DC, MC, V. Lunch Mon–Fri noon–2:30pm; dinner daily 6–10:30pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Most of Kuala Lumpur's historic sights are located in and around the Merdeka Square/Jalan Hishamuddin area, while many of the gardens, parks, and museums are out at Lake Gardens. Taxi fare between the two locations should run you about RM8 ($2.30/£1.45).

KL Hop-on Hop-off City Tours (✆ **03/2691-1382;** www.myhoponhopoff.com) is the best way to see the city attractions. Double-decker buses circle the inner city daily from 8:30am to 8:30pm at 30-minute intervals; commentaries are in several languages. It costs RM38 ($11/£6.85) adults and RM17 ($4.90/£3) children.

Central Market ★ The original Central Market, built in 1936, used to be a wet market, but the place is now a cultural center (air-conditioned) for local artists and craftspeople selling antiques, crafts, and curios. It's fantastic for buying Malaysian and Asian crafts and souvenirs, with two floors of shops from which to choose.

Jalan Benteng. ✆ **03/2274-6542.** Daily 10am–10pm. Shops open until 8:30 or 9pm.

Cosmo's World Theme Park ★★★ Kids The world's largest indoor amusement park is literally built into the walls of this 900-outlet shopping mall. You don't even need to ride the looping roller coaster to feel that thrill in the pit of your stomach. There are saner rides, too, plus a host of kiddie rides. Highly recommended for families with active kids.

Berjaya Times Sq. Shopping Mall, No. 1 Jalan Imbi. ✆ **03/2117-3118.** Adults RM32 ($9.30/£5.80), children RM28 ($8.10/£5). Daily 10am–10pm.

Islamic Arts Museum ★★ The seat of Islamic learning in Kuala Lumpur, the center has more than 7,000 displays of Islamic texts, artifacts, porcelain, and weaponry in local and visiting exhibits. The architecture of blue and white domes is reason enough to visit. There is a fine Middle Eastern restaurant and an excellent book and souvenir shop.

Jalan Lembah Perdana. ✆ **03/2274-2020.** www.iamm.org.my. Adults RM12 ($3.50/£2.15), children RM6 ($1.75/£1). Daily 10am–6pm.

Jamek Mosque (Masjid Jamek) The first settlers landed in Kuala Lumpur at the spot where the Gombak and Klang rivers meet, and in 1909 a mosque was built here.

Styled after an Indian Muslim design, it is one of the oldest mosques in the city. Interestingly, the mosque was designed by an Englishman, A. B. Hubbock, who was responsible for several other fine buildings in the city. Avoid prayer times, especially on Fridays at midday.

Jalan Tun Perak. Free admission.

Kuala Lumpur Lake Gardens (Taman Tasik Perdana) Built around an artificial lake, the 92-hectare (229-acre) park has plenty of space for jogging and rowing, and has a playground for the kids. It's the most popular park in Kuala Lumpur. Inside the Lake Gardens, find the **Kuala Lumpur Bird Park** ★ (Jalan Perdana; ✆ **03/2272-1010;** www.klbirdpark.com; RM39/$11/£7 adults, RM29/$8.40/£5.20 children; daily 9am–6pm) nestled in beautifully landscaped gardens, with more than 3,000 birds within a huge walk-in aviary. **Kuala Lumpur Orchid Garden** (Jalan Perdana; ✆ **03/2693-5399;** weekend and public holiday admission adults RM1/30¢/20p, free for children, free weekday admission for all; daily 9am–6pm) has a collection of more than 800 orchid species from Malaysia, and thousands of international varieties. The **Kuala Lumpur Butterfly Park** (Jalan Cenderasari; ✆ **03/2693-4799;** adults RM15/$4.35/£2.70, children RM8/$2.30/£1.45; daily 9am–6pm) has more than 6,000 butterflies belonging to 120 species making their home in this park, which has been landscaped with more than 15,000 plants to simulate the butterflies' natural rainforest environment. There are also other small animals and an insect museum.

Enter through Jalan Parliament. Free admission to the park. Daily 9am–6pm.

Kuala Lumpur Railway Station Built in 1911, the KL Railway Station is a beautiful example of Moorish architecture. Nearby KL Sentral is now the main rail hub.

Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin.

Malaysia Tourist Centre (MTC) At MTC you'll find an exhibit hall, tourist information services for Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia, and other travel-planning services. Saloma Café, within the complex, serves Malay food, and in the evening there are cultural dances and performances.

109 Jalan Ampang. ✆ **03/9235-4900.** Free admission. Daily 7am–10pm.

Menara Kuala Lumpur Standing 421m (1,380 ft.) tall, this concrete structure is the third-tallest tower in the world, and the views from the top reach to the far corners of the city and beyond. At the top, the glass windows are fashioned after the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Angsana Revolving Restaurant is located near the summit.

Bukit Nanas. ✆ **03/2020-5444.** Adults RM20 ($5.80/£3.60), children RM10 ($2.90/£1.80). Daily 9am–10pm.

Merdeka Square Surrounded by colonial architecture with an exotic local flair, the square was once the site of British social and sporting events. These days, Malaysia holds its spectacular Independence Day celebrations on the field, which is home to the world's tallest flagpole, standing at 100m (330 ft.).

Jalan Sultan. Free admission.

National Art Gallery In a tranquil complex that combines traditional Malay architectural elements with modern lines, the nation's most prominent art gallery claims a permanent collection of more than 2,500 works, many by Malaysia's most celebrated contemporary artists. The museum has six galleries, plus outdoor exhibitions and a cafe.

2 Jalan Temerloh off Jalan Tun Razak. ✆ **03/4025-4990.** www.artgallery.com.my. Free admission. Daily 10am–6pm.

National Mosque (Masjid Negara) Built in a modern design, the most distinguishing features of the mosque are its 73m (243-ft.) minaret and the umbrella-shaped roof, which is said to symbolize a newly independent Malaysia's aspirations for the future. Could be true, as the place was built in 1965, the year Singapore split from Malaysia. Visitors need to dress respectfully.

Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin (near the KL Railway Station). Free admission. Daily 9am–6pm.

National Museum (Muzim Negara) ★★ Located at Lake Gardens, the museum has many items of historical, cultural, and traditional significance, including art, weapons, musical instruments, and costumes. Most are a little tired.

Jalan Damansara. ✆ **03/2282-6255.** www.museum.gov.my. Admission adults RM2 (60¢/35p), free for children 11 and under. Daily 9am–6pm.

National Planetarium Kids In 2007, Malaysia's first astronaut went into space. The National Planetarium has a Space Hall with touch-screen interactive computers and hands-on experiments, a Viewing Gallery with binoculars for city views, and an Observatory Park with models of Chinese and Indian astronomy systems. Sadly, the displays are not all functioning properly.

Lake Gardens. ✆ **03/2273-5484.** Admission to exhibition hall adults RM3 (90¢/55p), children RM2 (60¢/35p). Tues–Sun 10am–4pm.

Petaling Street ★ This is the center of KL's Chinatown district. By day, stroll past hawker stalls, dim sum shops, wet markets, and all sorts of shops, from pawnshops to coffin makers. At night, a crazy bazaar (which is terribly crowded) pops up—look for designer knockoffs, fake watches, and pirated CDs and DVDs.

Petronas Twin Towers ★ Standing at an awesome 452m (1,482 ft.) above street level, with 88 stories, the towers were the tallest buildings in the world from 1998 to 2004 (when Taipei 101 snatched the title). From the outside, the structures are designed with the kind of geometric patterns common to Islamic architecture, and on levels 41 and 42 the two towers are linked by a bridge. Visitors are permitted on the viewing deck on the bridge from 9am to 7pm every day except Mondays and public holidays; otherwise, the building is accessible only if you are conducting business inside. Limited free tickets go fast, so line up early.

Kuala Lumpur City Centre. ✆ **03/2051-7770.** www.petronastwintowers.com.my. Free admission, but tickets are limited.

Sri Mahamariaman Temple This bright temple livens the gray street scene around it. It's a beautiful temple tucked away in a narrow street in KL's Chinatown area, which was built by Thambusamy Pillai, a pillar of old KL's Indian community.

Jalan Bandar. Free admission.

Sultan Abdul Samad Building In 1897 this exotic building was designed by two colonial architects, A. C. Norman and A. B. Hubbock, in a style called "Muhammadan" or "neo-Saracenic," which combines Indian Muslim architecture with Gothic and other Western elements. Built to house government administrative offices, today it is the home of Malaysia's Supreme Court and High Court. At night, the building is lit up.

Jalan Raja. Free admission.

GOLF

People from all over Asia flock to Malaysia for its golf courses, many of which are excellent standard courses designed by pros. The **Kuala Lumpur Golf & Country Club,** 10

 Jalan 1/70D Off Jalan Bukit Kiara (✆ **03/2093-1111**), has two courses, 18 holes each, par 71 and 72, with greens fees of RM180 ($52/£32) weekdays. The club is closed to nonmembers on weekends and holidays. **Suajana Golf & Country Club,** Km 3, Jalan Lapangan Terbang Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah, 46783 Subang Selangor (✆ **03/7846-1466;** fax 03/7846-7818), has two 18-hole courses, each par 72, with greens fees from RM220 ($64/£40) weekdays, RM353 ($102/£64) weekends and holidays.

SHOPPING

Kuala Lumpur is a truly great place to shop. In recent years, mall after mall has risen from city lots, filled with hundreds of retail outlets selling everything from haute couture to cheap chic clothing, electronic goods, jewelry, and arts and crafts. The **major shopping malls** are located in the area around Jalan Bukit Bintang and Jalan Sultan Ismail. Suria KLCC, just beneath the Petronas Twin Towers, is KL's most upmarket mall, while Berjaya Times Square wins the prize for excess with 900 shops, food and entertainment outlets, plus one of the world's largest indoor amusement parks. Pavilion KL on Jalan Bukit Bintang is the city's latest luxurious mall.

Still the best place for Malaysian handicrafts, the huge **Central Market** on Jalan Benteng (✆ **03/2274-6542**) keeps any shopper occupied for hours. There you'll find local artists and craftspeople selling their wares in the heart of town. It's also a good place to find Malaysian handicrafts from other regions of the country. One shop recommended for Malaysian handicrafts is **KL Craft Complex,** Section 3 Jalan Conlay (✆ **03/2162-7533**), with its warehouse selection of assorted goods from around the country, all of it fine quality. Don't forget to walk through the gardens to see the artists' village. In the bungalows toward the side of the building, you'll find some of Malaysia's finest contemporary artists displaying their works for sale. And wear comfy shoes; you may need to walk back to the main road to get a cab.

Another favorite shopping haunt in KL is **Chinatown,** along Petaling Street. Day and night, it's a great place to wander and bargain for knockoff designer clothing and accessories, sunglasses, T-shirts, souvenirs, fake watches, and pirated CDs and DVDs.

Pasar malam **(night markets)** are very popular evening activities in KL. Whole blocks are taken up with these brightly lit and bustling markets packed with stalls selling almost everything you can dream of. Two good bets for catching one: On Saturday nights, head for Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, while the Bangsar Night Market starts at dusk and is popular with trendy residents.

KUALA LUMPUR AFTER DARK

There's nightlife to spare in KL, from fashionable lounges to pubs perfect for lounging. You can expect to pay about RM10 to RM25 ($2.90–$7.30/£1.80–£4.50) for a pint of beer, depending on what and where you order. Although quite a few pubs are open for lunch, most clubs won't open until about 6 or 7pm. These places must all close by 1 or 2am, so don't plan on staying out too late. Nearly all have a happy hour, usually between 5 and 7pm, when drink discounts apply on draft beers and "house-pour" (lower shelf) mixed drinks. Generally, you're expected to wear dress-casual clothing for these places, but avoid old jeans, sneakers, and very revealing outfits.

The center of nightlife, if you want to browse, begins at the corner of Jalan Sultan Ismail and Jalan P. Ramlee. Walk along P. Ramlee, and you'll find bars of all kinds, plus cafes and coffee shops. Jalan Bukit Bintang is another popular area to visit.

For a live music with your drinks, the recently renovated **Hard Rock Cafe,** Jalan Sultan Ismail next to Concorde Hotel (✆ **03/2715-5555**), hosts the best of the regional

bands, which play most nights for a crowd of locals, tourists, and expatriates who take their parties very seriously.

The biggest dance club in town is **Zouk,** fashioned after the ultra-successful Zouk in Singapore. It's at 113 Jalan Ampang, down the street from MTC (✆ **03/2171-1997**). There's a cover charge of anywhere from RM25 to RM40 ($7.30–$12/£4.50–£7.20), depending on what's going on inside.

Bangsar, just outside the city limits, is 2 or 3 blocks of bars, cafes, and restaurants that cater to a variety of tastes (in fact, so many expatriates hang out there, they call it Kweiloh Lumpur, "Foreigner Lumpur" in Mandarin). Every taxi driver knows where it is. Get in and ask to go to Jalan Telawi Tiga in Bangsar (fare should be no more than RM7–RM10/$2–$2.90/£1.25–£1.80), and once there it's very easy to catch a cab back to town.

SIDE TRIPS FROM KUALA LUMPUR

Batu Caves ★★

Located 13km (8 miles) north of Kuala Lumpur, **Batu Caves** have become one of the most significant Hindu religious sites outside of India. Built within a series of caves inside a limestone hill, three main caves make up a temple complex devoted to the Lord Murugan. During the Hindu Thaipusam festival, held each year in either January or February, devotees bathe in the nearby Batu River before donning *kavadi,* stainless steel racks decorated with flowers and fruits and held to the body with pins and skewers. A procession leads from the river to the hill, and up the 272 steps to the main cave. The festival draws more than 800,000 each year, but the caves are a nice side trip any time. The most convenient way to visit the caves is by taxi, which from KL will take about 25 to 30 minutes and costs approximately RM15 to RM20 ($4.35–$5.80/£2.70–£3.60). During Thaipusam, contact the Tourism Malaysia office for shuttle instructions.

Taman Negara National Park ★★★

Malaysia's most famous national park, **Taman Negara,** covers 434,350 hectares (1,085,750 acres) of primary rainforest estimated to be as old as 130 million years and encompasses within its border **Gunung Tahan,** peninsular Malaysia's highest peak at 2,187m (7,175 ft.) above sea level.

Prepare to see lush vegetation and rare orchids, some 675 bird species, and maybe, if you're lucky, some barking deer, tapir, elephants, tigers, leopards, and wild cattle or gaur. As for primates, there are long-tailed macaques, leaf monkeys, gibbons, and more. Taman Negara showcases efforts to keep this land in as pristine a state as possible, despite extensive logging in many parts of the country.

There are outdoor activities for any level of adventurer. Short **jungle walks** to observe nature are lovely, but then so are the hard-core 9-day treks or climbs up Gunung Tahan. There are also overnight trips to night hides where you can observe animals up close. The jungle canopy walk is one of the longest in the world, and at 25m (83 ft.) aboveground, the view is spectacular. There are also rivers for rafting and swimming, fishing spots, and a couple of caves. Fishing permits must be obtained beforehand from the Ranger Headquarters.

If you plan your trip through one of the main resort operators, they can arrange, in addition to accommodations, all meals, treks, and a coach transfer to and from Kuala Lumpur. Prices vary, depending on the season and your level of comfort desired. The best time to visit is between the months of April and September; other times it will be a tad wet, and that's why it's called a rainforest.

Mutiara Taman Negara Resort ★, well established in the business of hosting visitors to the park, has the best accommodations in terms of comfort. It organizes trips for 3 days and 2 nights or for 4 days and 3 nights, as well as an a la carte deal where you pay for lodging and activities separately. Accommodations come in many styles: a bungalow suite for families; chalet and chalet suite, both good for couples; standard guesthouse rooms; and dormitory hostels for budget travelers. To get an idea of pricing, a 3-day, 2-night package runs about RM369 ($107/£66) per person, double occupancy in a chalet, with air-conditioning with attached bathroom, plus full board, meals, and activities. What it doesn't include is bus transfer from KL (RM80/$23/£14 per person round-trip) and the boat upriver from the park entrance (RM56/$16/£10 per person round-trip). A la carte activities include a 3-hour jungle trek, a 1 1/2-hour night jungle walk, the half-day Lata Berkoh river trip with swimming, a 2-hour cave exploration, and a trip down the rapids in a rubber raft (Kuala Tahan, Jerantut, 27000 Pahang; ✆ **09/266-3500,** or 03/2782-2222 Kuala Lumpur Sales Office; www.mutiarahotels.com).

Genting Highlands

The "City of Entertainment," as Genting is known locally, serves as Malaysia's answer to Las Vegas, complete with bright lights (which can be seen from Kuala Lumpur) and gambling. And although most people come here for the casino, there's a wide range of other activities. Outside of the casino, there's a pond, a bowling alley, and an indoor heated pool. For children, the Genting Theme Park covers 9,300 sq. m (100,000 sq. ft.) of mostly rides, plus many Western fast-food outlets, games, and other attractions. The **Awana Golf and Country Club** (✆ **03/6101-3025**) is the premier golf course in these hills.

Genting has six hotels of varying prices within the resort. Rates vary depending on the season, so be prepared for higher rates during the winter holidays. **Genting Hotel** is the best choice—a newer property that's linked directly to the casino. Weekday rates are from RM245 ($71/£44) for double occupancy, and weekend rates are from RM355 ($103/£64) double occupancy.

For buses from Kuala Lumpur, call **Genting Highlands Transport,** operating buses every half-hour from 6:30am to 9pm daily from KL Sentral train station. The cost for one-way is RM7.50 ($2.20/£1.35), and the trip takes 1 hour. The bus lets you off at the foot of the hill, where you take the cable car to the top (price included with bus ticket). For bus information, call ✆ **03/6251-8398.**

You can also get there by hiring an **outstation taxi.** The cost is RM40 ($12/£7.20), and a taxi can be arranged by calling the **Puduraya** outstation taxi stand at ✆ **03/2078-0213.**

The **Genting Highlands Resort** is owned and operated by Resorts World Berhad, which will be glad to provide you with hotel reservations if you call ✆ **03/2718-1118.**

Cameron Highlands

Located in the hills, this colonial-era resort town has a cool climate, which makes it the perfect place for weekend getaways for Malaysians and Singaporeans who are sick of the heat. If you've been in the region awhile, you might also appreciate the respite.

The climate is also very conducive to agriculture. After the area's discovery by British surveyor William Cameron in 1885, the major crop here became tea, which is still grown today. The area's lovely gardens supply cities throughout the region with vegetables, flowers, and fruit year-round. Among the favorites here are the strawberries, and at the many commercial flower nurseries you can see chrysanthemums, fuchsias, and roses growing on the terraces.

Temperatures in the highlands av erage 70°F (21°C) during the day and 50°F (10°C) at night. There are paths for tr eks though the countr yside and to peaks of surr ounding mountains. Two water falls, the R obinson F alls and P arit F alls, hav e pools at their feet where you can swim.

There are **no visitor infor mation ser vices** here. They've been closed for a v ery long time and hav e no immediate plans for r eopening. You'll find banks with A TMs and money-changing services along the main r oad in Tanah Rata, the main tow n.

The best accommodations here are in the **Smokehouse Hotel,** Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, Pahang Darul Makmur (✆ **05/491-1215;** fax 05/491-1214; www.thesmokehouse.com.my; RM440–RM750/$128–$218/£79–£135 suite). Situated between Tanah Rata and B rinchang tow ns, this pictur esque Tudor mansion has pr etty gar dens and a charming old-world ambience. Built in 1937 as a country house in the hey day of colonial British getaways, its conv ersion into a hotel has kept the place happily in the 1930s. Guest suites hav e four-poster beds and antique furnishings, with some of the w ear that one might expect from an old inn. The hotel encourages guests to play golf at the neighboring course, sit for afternoon tea with strawberr y confections, or tr ek along nearb y paths (for which they'll provide a picnic basket).

Most of the sights can be seen in a day , but it 's difficult to plan y our time w ell. In Cameron Highlands, try one of the sightseeing outfits in either Brinchang or Tanah Rata. **C. S. Travel & Tours,** 47 Main Rd., Tanah Rata (✆ **05/491-1200**), is a highly reputable agency that will plan half-day tours for RM20 ($5.80/£3.60) or full days star ting from RM80 ($23/£14). O n your average tour y ou'll see the Boh tea plantation and factor y, flower nurseries, rose gardens, strawberry farms, butterfly farms, and the S am Poh Buddhist Temple. You're r equired to pay admission to each attraction y ourself (about RM5/$1.45/90p). They also pr ovide trekking and o vernight camping tours in the surrounding hills with local trail guides.

If you want to hit ar ound some balls, **Padang Golf,** Main Road between Tanah Rata and Brinchang (✆ **05/491-1126**), has 18 holes at par 71, with gr eens fees around RM53 ($15/£9.55) on w eekdays and RM84 ($24/£15) on w eekends. They also pr ovide club rentals, caddies, shoes, and car ts.

To get to Cameron Highlands, **Kurnia Bistari Express Bus** (✆ **05/491-1485**) oper-ates betw een K uala L umpur and Tanah Rata daily for ar ound RM20 ($5.80/£3.60) one-way. They don't accept bookings in K uala Lumpur, asking y ou to just sho w up at Puduraya bus terminal to buy your ticket and board the next bus. The bus terminal is in the center of tow n along the main drag. J ust next to it is the taxi stand. I t's a two-horse town; y ou can 't miss either of them. O utstation taxis fr om KL will cost RM240 ($70/£43) for the trip. Call ✆ **03/2078-0213** for booking. Taxis are cheaper on the way back because they don't have to climb the mountains.

5 MELAKA ★

Melaka became the birthplace of Islam in Malaysia when Arab traders imported the faith in the early 1400s. Ar ound that time, the por t city r ose to international attention as a major center for Southeast Asian trade with China and the Middle East. European powers conquered, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British; however, over the centuries Melaka lost its status to neighboring Singapore. Today, the sleepy backwater town reveals remnants of past conquer ors, settlers, and traders in its ar chitecture.

GETTING THERE

BY TRAIN Melaka doesn't have a proper train station, but the **KTM** stops at Tampin (✆ **06/441-1034**), 38km (24 miles) north of the city. It's not the most convenient way in and out of the city, but if you decide to stop en route between Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, you can easily catch a waiting taxi to your hotel in town for RM40 ($12/£7.20).

BY BUS From Singapore, contact **Grassland Express** (✆ **65/6293-1166;** www.grassland.com.sg). A bus departs at 8am daily for the 4 1/2-hour trip (S$27/$18/£11). From **KL's Puduraya Bus Terminal** on Jalan Pudu, **Transnasional** (✆ **03/6201-3463**) has hourly buses between 8am and 10pm for about RM10 ($2.90/£1.80). The trip takes about 2 1/2 hours.

The bus station in Melaka is at Jalan Kilang, within the city. Taxis are easy to find from here.

BY TAXI **Outstation taxis** can bring you here from Kuala Lumpur for RM140 ($41/£25). The outstation taxi stand in Melaka is at the bus terminal on Jalan Kilang.

GETTING AROUND

Most of the historic sights around the town square are well within walking distance. For other trips **taxis** are the most convenient way around, but are at times difficult to find. They're also not as clearly marked as in KL or Johor Bahru. They are not metered, so be prepared to bargain. Basically, no matter what you do, you'll always be charged a higher rate than a local. Tourists are almost always quoted at RM10 ($2.90/£1.80) for local trips. Malaysians pay RM5 ($1.45/90p). If you're feeling sporty, you can bargain for a price somewhere in between.

Trishaws (bicycle rickshaws) are all over the historic areas of town, and in Melaka they're renowned for being very, very garishly decorated. Negotiate for hourly rates of about RM30 ($8.70/£5.40) for two people.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Melaka Tourism Information Centre** is on Jalan Kota at the Town Square next to the bridge (✆ **06/281-4803**).

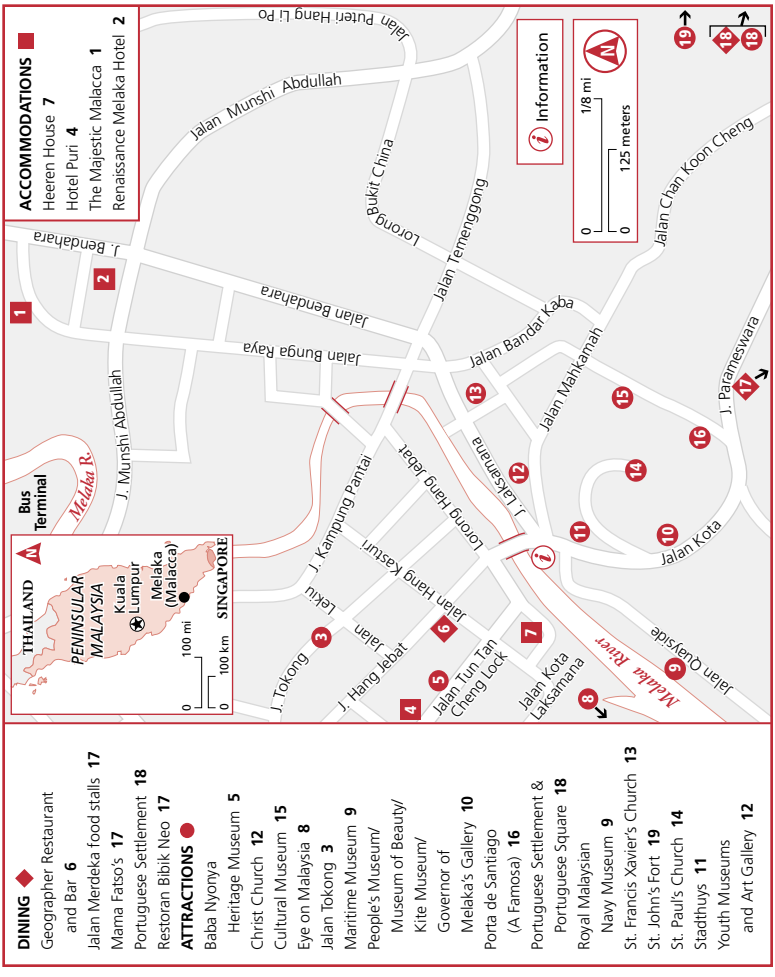
FAST FACTS: MELAKA

Melaka's **area code** is 06. Major **banks** are located in the historic center of town, with a couple along Jalan Putra. **Internet** places come and go. Your best bet is to ask your hotel's concierge or the Melaka Tourism Information Centre (see above) for the nearest cafes.

WHERE TO STAY

Melaka is not very large, and most of the places to stay are well within walking distance of attractions, shopping, and restaurants.

Heeren House ★★ This is the place to stay in Melaka for a taste of the local culture. Started by a local family, the small guesthouse is a renovated 100-year-old building furnished in traditional Peranakan and colonial style and located right in the heart of historical European Melaka. All the bedrooms have views of the Melaka River, and outside the front door of the hotel is a winding stretch of old buildings housing antiques shops. Just walk out and wander. Small rooms have very basic amenities. The rooms on the second floor are somewhat larger. Laundry service is available, and there's a cafe and gift shop on the premises. It's a very friendly establishment run by a family who is very knowledgeable on local events. Reserve well in advance.



1 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, 75200 Melaka. ✆ **06/281-4241.** Fax 06/281-4239. 6 units. RM139 ($40/£25) double; RM269 ($78/£48) family room. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Cafe; laundry service; souvenir shop. *In room:* A/C, TV, tea-/coffeemaking facilities.

Hotel Puri (Value) In olden days, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock was known as "Millionaire Row" for all the w ealthy families that liv ed here. This old "mansion" has been conv erted into a guesthouse, its tiled parlor has become a lobb y, and the courtyard is where breakfast is served each morning. Although Hotel Puri isn't big on space, it is big on value (discount rates can be pretty low). Rooms are very clean, and while not overly stylish, are comfortable enough for any weary traveler. A friendly and responsive staff adds to the appeal.

118 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, 75200 Melaka. ✆ **06/282-5588.** Fax 06/281-5588. www.hotelpuri.com. 50 units. RM138 ($40/£25) double; RM255 ($74/£46) triple; from RM265 ($77/£48) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/ satellite programming, fridge, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer.

The Majestic Malacca ★★ The Majestic Malacca is an integral part of Melaka's history, dating back to the 1800s. The facade is faithfully restored from the original design, but inside, the hotel is stylish and plush with all the modern conveniences travelers need to enjoy historic Melaka. Those who appreciate heritage properties and grand hotels should choose the Majestic, although it still retains a boutique ambience.

188 Jalan Bunga Raya, 75100 Melaka. ✆ **06/289-8000.** Fax 06/289-8080. www.majesticmalacca.com. 54 units. RM977 ($283/£176) double; from RM2,540 ($737/£457) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; lounge for afternoon tea; swimming pool; spa; gym; concierge; local tours; limousine service; room service; library. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Renaissance Melaka Hotel ★ Renaissance is one of the better hotels in Melaka and, according to business travelers, is the most reliable place for quality accommodations. Aside from the pieces of Peranakan porcelain and art in the public areas, you could almost believe you weren't in Melaka at all. The hotel is, however, situated in a good location, though you'll still need a taxi to most of the sights. Rooms are fairly large and filled with Western comforts. Don't expect much from the views, as the hotel is in the commercial part of the city. No historical landmarks to gaze upon here.

Jalan Bendahara, 75100 Melaka. ✆ **888/236-2427** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/251-259 in Australia, 800/264-333 in New Zealand, 800/221-222 in the U.K., or 06/284-8888. Fax 06/284-9269. www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mkzrn-renaissance-melaka-hotel. 294 units. RM480 ($139/£86) double; from RM620 ($180/£112) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; outdoor pool; golf nearby; squash courts; fitness center w/sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; tour desk; limousine service; business center; salon; service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

WHERE TO DINE

In Melaka you'll find the typical mix of authentic Malay and Chinese food, and as the city was the major settling place for the Peranakans in Malaysia, their unique style of food is featured in many of the local restaurants.

A good recommendation for a quick bite at lunch or dinner if you're strolling in the historic area is the long string of open-air food stalls along Jalan Merdeka, just between Mahkota Plaza Shopping and Warrior Square. **Mama Fatso's** is especially good for Chinese-style seafood and Malay sambal curry. A good meal will run you about RM35 to RM40 ($10–$12/£6.30–£7.20) per person.

Try local Peranakan cuisine at **Restoran Bibik Neo** (No. 6, ground floor, Jalan Merdeka, Taman Melaka Raya; ✆ **06/281-7054**), a small coffee shop that's about as authentic as you can get. *Ikan assam* with eggplant is a tasty mild fish curry that's very rich and tart, and be sure to try the *otak-otak* (pounded fish and spices baked in a banana leaf).

For a taste of Portuguese Melaka, the **Portuguese Settlement** has some open-air food stalls by the water, where in the evenings hawkers sell an assortment of dishes inspired by these former colonial rulers, including many fresh seafood offerings. Saturday nights are best when, at 8pm, there's a cultural show with music and dancing. Other times it may be slow business. (Jalan d'Albuquerque off Jalan Ujon Pasir; dinner from RM20–RM30/$5.80–$8.70/£3.60–£5.40 per person; no credit cards.)

Geographer Restaurant and Bar, located along the popular Jalan Hang Jebat (✆ **06/281-6813**), is very accommodating to travelers. They know how to make travelers happy, so expect icy cold beer, international comfort food, local dishes, souvenirs, Wi-Fi, and evening entertainment, including bands on some nights. They only serve chicken—the tandoori version is recommended. Vegetarians are well catered to. They're open daily from midmorning till late as the bar and music swings into action. Prices range from RM10 to RM40 ($2.90–$12/£1.80–£7.20).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

To get the most out of Melaka, it's best to have a bit of knowledge about the history of the place. Most of the preserved historical sites are on both sides of the Melaka River. Start at **Stadthuys** (the old town hall, pronounced *stat*-highs), and you'll see most of Melaka pretty quickly.

Museums

Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum ★ Called "Millionaire's Row," Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock is lined with row houses that were built by the Dutch and later bought by wealthy Peranakans; the architectural style reflects their East-meets-West lifestyle. The house dates from 1896 when three houses were combined into one. The entrance fee includes a guided tour.

48–50 Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. ✆ **06/283-1273.** Adults RM8 ($2.30/£1.45), children RM4 ($1.15/70p). Daily 10am–12:30pm and 2–4:30pm.

Cultural Museum (Muzium Budaya) ★ A replica of the former palace of Sultan Mansur Syah (1456–77), this museum was rebuilt according to historical descriptions to house a fine collection of cultural artifacts such as clothing, weaponry, and royal items. The gardens are quite nice.

Kota Rd., next to Porta de Santiago. ✆ **06/282-6526.** Adults RM2 (60¢/35p), children 50 sen (15¢/10p). Daily 9am–5:30pm.

Eye on Malaysia KL's 60m (197 ft.) Ferris wheel was moved here, at the mouth of the Melaka River, in November 2008. The 12-minute ride takes you over the oldest parts of Melaka, with bird's-eye views of the town's most historically significant buildings and streets. The Ferris wheel sits atop a 4-acre (1.5-hectare) complex that's being developed in phases through 2009 with a light and sound waterscreen showcase, a Malaysian International Space Adventure (MISA) museum, and food outlets.

Munara Sungai Melaka, Kota Laksamana. ✆ **06/284-1888.** www.eyeonmalaysia.com.my. Adults RM20 ($5.55/£3.70), children RM10 ($2.80/£1.85). Mon–Thu 10am–11pm; Fri–Sun 10am–midnight.

Maritime Museum and the Royal Malaysian Navy Museum These two museums are located across the street from one another but share admission fees. The Maritime Museum is in a restored 16th-century Portuguese ship, with exhibits dedicated to Melaka's history with the sea.

Quayside Rd. ✆ **06/282-6526.** Admission adults RM3 (90¢/55p), children RM1 (30¢/20p). Daily 9am–5:30pm.

The People's Museum, the Museum of Beauty, the Kite Museum, and the Governor of Melaka's Gallery This strange collection of displays is housed under one roof. The People's Museum is the story of development in Melaka. The Museum of Beauty is a look at cultural differences of beauty throughout time and around the world.

 The Kite Museum features the traditions of making and flying *wau* (kites) in Malaysia, and the governor's personal collection is on exhibit at the Governor's Gallery.

Kota Rd. ✆ **06/282-6526.** Admission adults RM2 (60¢/35p), children 50 sen (15¢/10p). Daily 9am–5:30pm.

Stadthuys—The Museums of History & Ethnography and the Museum of Literature ★ The Stadthuys Town Hall was built by the Dutch in 1650, and it's now home to the Melaka Ethnographical and Historical Museum, which displays customs and traditions of all the peoples of Melaka, and takes you through the rich history of this city. Behind Stadthuys, the Museum of Literature includes old historical accounts and local legends. Admission price is for both exhibits.

Located at the circle intersection of Jalan Quayside, Jalan Laksamana, and Jalan Chan Koon Cheng. ✆ **06/282-6526.** Admission adults RM5 ($1.45/90p), children RM2 (60¢/35p). Daily 9am–5:30pm.

Youth Museums and Art Gallery In the old General Post office are these displays dedicated to Malaysia's youth organizations and to the nation's finest artists.

Laksamana Rd. ✆ **06/282-6526.** Admission adults RM2 (60¢/35p), children 50 sen (15¢/10p). Tues–Sun 9am–5:30pm.

Historical Sites

Christ Church The Dutch built this place in 1753 as a Dutch Reform Church, and its architectural details include such wonders as ceiling beams cut from a single tree and a *Last Supper* glazed tile motif above the altar. It was later consecrated as an Anglican church, and Mass is still performed today in English, Chinese, and Tamil.

Located on Jalan Laksamana. Free admission.

Jalan Tokong ★ Not far from Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock is Jalan Tokong, called the "Street of Harmony" by the locals because it has three coexisting places of worship: the Kampung Kling Mosque, the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, and the Sri Poyyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple.

Melaka River Cruise ★ The Melaka River was once in a pretty nasty state, but the authorities realized its tourism potential and cleaned it up. A flotilla of small boats transports sightseers up and down from the departure and drop-off point on the riverbank in front of Dutch Square. Not only can you see the historic buildings, old warehouses (godowns), interesting mangrove stands, churches, and villages, but you can peer into people's backyards to see the comings and goings of riverside life. Tours last about 45 minutes in boats ranging from 20- to 40-seaters, and normally a minimum of eight passengers is required before departure.

Departs Taman Rempah near Jalan Mata Kuching. ✆ **06/281-4322.** Adults RM10 ($2.90/£1.80), children RM5 ($1.45/90p). Daily 9:30am–5pm and 6pm–midnight.

Porta de Santiago (A Famosa) ★ Once the site of a Portuguese fortress called A Famosa, all that remains here today of the fortress is the entrance gate, which was saved from demolition by Sir Stamford Raffles. When the British East India Company demolished the place, Raffles realized the arch's historical value and saved it. The fort was built in 1512, but the inscription above the arch, "Anno 1607," marks the date when the Dutch overthrew the Portuguese.

Located on Jalan Kota, at the intersection of Jalan Parameswara. Free admission.

Portuguese Settlement and Portuguese Square The Portuguese Settlement is an enclave once designated for Portuguese settlers after they conquered Melaka in 1511.

Some elements of their presence remain in the Lisbon-style architecture. Later, in 1920, the area was a Eurasian neighborhood. In the center of the settlement, Portuguese Square is a modern attraction with Portuguese restaurants, handicrafts, souvenirs, and cultural shows. It was built in 1985 in an architectural style to reflect the surrounding flavor of Portugal.

Located down Jalan d'Albuquerque off of Jalan Ujon Pasir in the southern part of the city. Free admission.

St. Francis Xavier's Church This church was built in 1849 and dedicated to St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit who brought Catholicism to Melaka and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Located on Jalan Laksamana. Free admission.

St. John's Fort The fort, built by the Dutch in the late 18th century, sits on top of St. John's Hill. Funny how the cannons point inland, huh? At the time, threats to the city came from land. It was named after a Portuguese church to St. John the Baptist, which originally occupied the site.

Located off Lorong Bukit Senjuang. Free admission.

St. Paul's Church The church was built by the Portuguese in 1521, but when the Dutch came in, they made it part of A Famosa, converting the altar into a cannon mount. The open tomb inside was once the resting place of St. Francis Xavier, a missionary who spread Catholicism throughout Southeast Asia, and whose remains were later moved to Goa.

Located behind Porta de Santiago. Free admission.

SHOPPING

Antiques hunting has been a major draw to Melaka for decades. Distinct Peranakan and teak furniture, porcelain, and household items fetch quite a price these days, due to a steady increase in demand for these rare treasures. The area down and around Jalan Hang Jebat and Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lok called **Jonker Walk** sports many little antiques shops that are filled with as many gorgeous items as any local museum. You'll also find handmade crafts, ready-made batik clothing, and other souvenirs. Whether you're buying or just looking, it's a fun way to spend an afternoon.

For crafts and souvenirs, you'll also find a row of shops along the lane beside Stadthuys. Most prices seem fair, but you may need to do a little bargaining.

6 PENANG ★★★

Penang has it all: beaches, history, diverse culture, shopping, food—you name it. If you have only a short time to visit Malaysia but want to take in a variety of experiences, Penang is your place.

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, Penang has had relatively good financial success. Today, the state of Penang is made up of the island and a small strip of land on the Malaysian mainland. Georgetown is the seat of government for the state. Penang Island covers an area of 285 sq. km (111 sq. miles) and has a population of a little more than one million. Surprisingly, the population is mostly Chinese (59%), followed by Malays (32%) and Indians (7%).

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Penang International Airport** (✆ **04/643-4411**) has flights that connect from all over the world. **Malaysia Airlines** (✆ **1300/883-000;** www.malaysiaairlines.

com) has about 20 flights each day from KL, plus connecting flights from all over the country and region. Other airlines that service Penang are **Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Cathay Pacific, AirAsia** (✆ **1300/889-933;** www.airasia.com), and **Firefly** (✆ **03/7845-4543;** www.fireflyz.com.my).

The airport is 20km (12 miles) from the city. To get into town, you must purchase fixed-rate coupons for taxis RM38 ($11/£6.85) to Georgetown; RM60 ($17/£11) to Batu Feringgi. There are also car rentals at the airport; choose **Avis** (✆ **04/643-9633**).

BY TRAIN By rail, the overnight trip from KL to Butterworth takes 10 hours and costs RM85 ($25/£15) first-class passage, or as low as RM17 ($4.90/£3) for economy class. The prices vary greatly depending on whether you choose upper or lower berth, and what class passage you take. Call **KL Sentral** (✆ **03/2267-1200**) for schedule information.

The train will let you off at the **Butterworth Railway Station** (✆ **04/323-7962**), on Jalan Bagan Dalam (near the ferry terminal) in Butterworth, on the Malaysian mainland. From there, you can take a taxi to the island or head for the ferry close by.

BY BUS Many buses will bring you to Butterworth or Georgetown, but it's only recommended if you're not in a hurry. **Aeroline** (✆ **03/6258-8800;** www.aeroline.com.my) offers excellent executive coach services from KL to Penang.

BY FERRY The ferry to Penang is nestled between the Butterworth Railway Station and the Butterworth bus terminal. It operates from 6am to 12:30am daily and takes 20 minutes from pier to pier. Ferries leave every 10 minutes. Purchase your passage by dropping RM1.20 (35¢/20p) exact change in the turnstile (there's a change booth if you don't have it). Fare is paid only on the trip to Penang. The return is free. The ferry lets you off at Weld Quay (✆ **04/310-2360**).

BY TAXI The **outstation taxi** stand is in Butterworth next to the bus terminal (✆ **04/323-2045**). Fares to Butterworth from KL will be about RM350 ($102/£63).

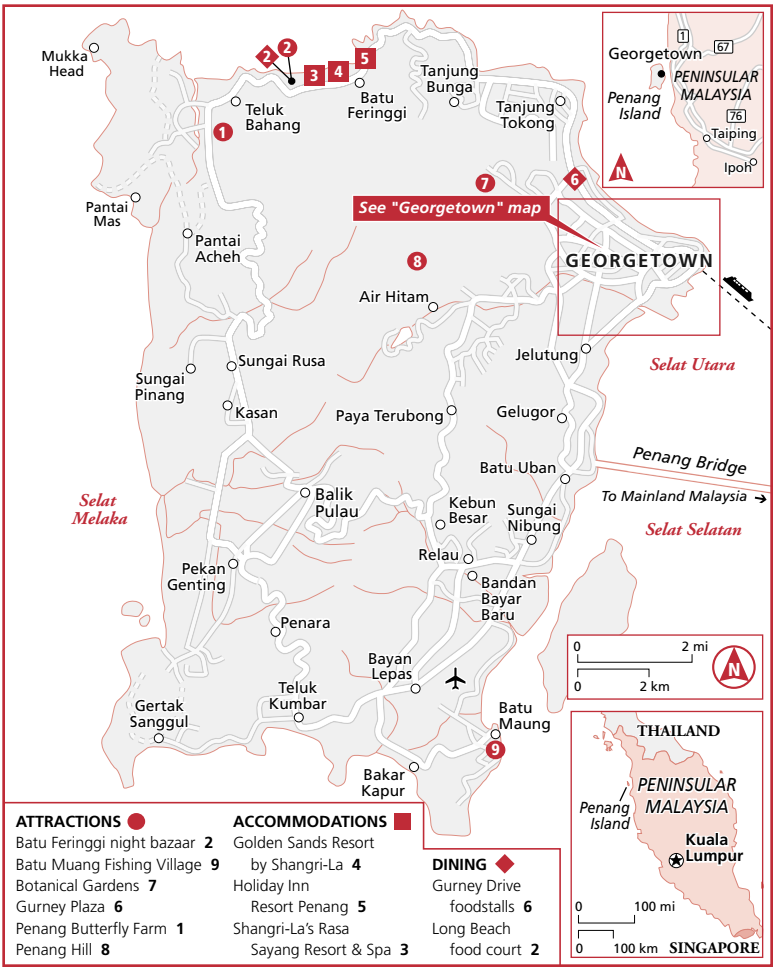
GETTING AROUND

BY TAXI Taxis are abundant, but be warned they do not use meters, so you must agree on the price before you ride. They frequently cheat tourists. Most trips within the city are between RM5 and RM10 ($1.45–$2.90/90p–£1.80). If you're staying out at the Batu Feringgi beach resort area, expect taxis to town to run RM25 to RM40 ($7.25–$12/£4.50–£7.20). The ride is about 15 or 20 minutes, but can take 30 minutes during rush hour.

BY BUS Buses also run all over the island and are well used by tourists who don't want to drop cash every time they want to go to the beach. The dark blue no. 93 and the white with blue no. 202 both operate between KOMTAR in Georgetown and the beach resorts at Batu Feringgi. Fare is anywhere under RM3 (90¢/55p). Get exact change from your hotel's cashier before you set off and ask the bus driver about the exact fare to your destination.

CAR RENTAL If you want to drive, call Avis at the Penang International Airport at ✆ **04/643-9633.** They can also provide a car with driver for RM80 ($23/£14) per hour, for a minimum booking of 4 hours. If you plan to visit areas off Penang Island, the rate will increase.

BY BICYCLE & MOTORCYCLE Along Batu Feringgi there are bicycles and motorcycles (little 100cc scooters, really) available for rent. We don't recommend renting the scooters. You can never be certain of their maintenance record, and Penang's drivers are careless about watching your back.



BY TRISHAW In Georgetown it's possible to find some trishaw action for about RM30 ($8.70/£5.40) an hour. It's kitschy and touristy and recommended for traveling between in-town sights, at least for an hour or two . Bargain hard; these guys are skilled negotiators, but they do work hard for the money.

ON FOOT Everyone should walk at least part of the time to see the sights of Georgetown because there's so much to see between each landmark and exhibit. A taxi, even a trishaw, will whisk you past back alleys where elderly haircutters set up alfresco shops, bicycle repairmen sit fixing tubes in front of their stores, and Chinese grannies fan themselves in the shade. Give yourself at least a day here. Start wandering early in the morning, by the waterfront, down the back alleys, before the heat of the sun takes hold.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The main **Tourism Malaysia** office is located at Level 56, KOMTAR Building (Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak) on Jalan Penang (✆ **04/264-3494**). There's another information center at **Penang International Airport** (✆ **04/643-0501**).

FAST FACTS: PENANG

Penang's **area code** is 04. The **banking center** of Georgetown is in the downtown area (close to Ft. Cornwallis) on Leboh Pantai, Leboh Union, and Leboh Downing, but you'll find ATMs in KOMTAR and other smaller shopping plazas as well. **Internet** cafes come and go, so it's best to ask your hotel's concierge for the closest place to your hotel, or use the hotel's. If you're in town, Chulia Street, the main drag for backpacker tourists, has Internet access in a few places.

WHERE TO STAY

Although Georgetown has many hotels right in the city for convenient sightseeing, most visitors choose to stay at one of the beach resorts 30 minutes away at Batu Feringgi. Trips back and forth can be a bother (regardless of the resorts' free shuttle services), but if you're not staying in a resort, most of the finer beaches are off-limits.

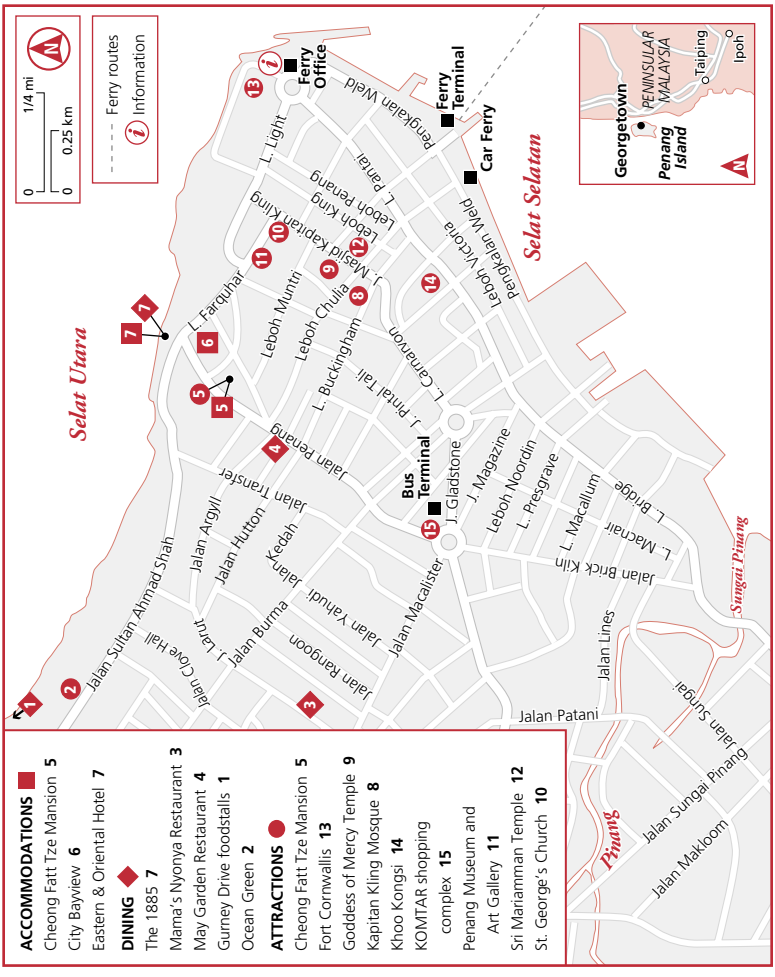
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion ★★ (Finds) This is definitely one of the most memorable hotel experiences in Malaysia—to sleep inside the walls of one of Asia's most carefully restored heritage homes, the huge and opulent mansion of 19th-century millionaire Cheong Fatt Tze. The only facilities to speak of are a courtyard breakfast area, a library, and a TV room (guest rooms do not have TVs). Each guest rooms is distinctive in shape and decor, with terra cotta or teak floors, charming architectural detail, and furnished in antiques and replicas of the period. Double rooms have either twin beds or one king-size bed. Suites are also available. All are air-conditioned and have private bathrooms, though they are pretty small and bare. Don't expect the professional polish of the finer hotels, but then, with so much beauty around you, who cares?

14 Leith St., 10200 Penang. ✆ **04/262-0006.** www.cheongfatttzemansion.com. 16 units. RM350 ($102/£63) double; from RM450 ($131/£81) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Breakfast area w/tea and beverage service; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms; valet service; library; TV room. *In room:* A/C, tea-/coffeemaking facilities.

The City Bayview Hotel, Penang This city hotel is perfect for those who visit Penang for its cultural treasures rather than its beaches. A good budget choice, it has a number of fair dining venues, including a rooftop revolving restaurant with excellent views of the island. Choose from guest rooms in the newer wing, completed in 1999, or those in the old wing. Either choice offers cool rooms in neutral tones, not as elegant as many, but comfortable and definitely offering value for the money.

25-A Farquhar St., Georgetown, 10200 Penang. ✆ **04/263-3161.** Fax 04/263-4124. 320 units. RM276 ($80/£50) double; from RM828 ($240/£149) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; club w/live entertainment; lobby lounge; outdoor pool; concierge; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Eastern & Oriental Hotel (E&O) ★★ This is without a doubt the most atmospheric hotel in Penang, with manicured lawns and tropical gardens flanking a white colonial-style mansion, a lacelike facade, and Moorish minarets. Accommodations are all suites, with cozy sitting nooks and sleeping quarters separated by pocket sliding doors. You can expect molding details around every door and paned window, Oriental carpets



over polished teak floorboar ds, and E gyptian cotton linens dr essing each poster bed. Dining along the hotel's many verandas is gorgeous. One caveat—no beach, but the pool in the seafront garden is very pretty.

10 F arquhar St., 10200 P enang. ✆ **04/222-2000.** F ax 04/261-6333. w ww.e-o-hotel.com. 101 units . RM900–RM2,050 ($261–$595/£162–£369) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; English-style pub; outdoor pool; small fitness c enter w/sauna; c oncierge; limousine ser vice; room ser vice; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities.

Golden S ands Resor t b y Shangri-La ★ Kids Shangri-La has been operating resorts on Penang longer than anyone else, and because it got here first you can bet it laid claim to the best beach. S hangri-La has two neighboring pr operties on this site, G olden

Sands and its more exclusive sister, Rasa Sayang. A four-star resort, Golden Sands is priced lower than the Rasa Sayang, so it attracts more families. The beach, pool area, and public spaces fill up fast, and folks are occupied all day with beach sports such as parasailing and jet-skiing, and pool games. A large indoor playground is popular with kids 11 and under. Rooms are large with full amenities, and the higher-priced categories have views of the pool and sea. A new round of renovations will be completed in mid-2009.

Batu Feringgi Beach, 11100 Penang. ✆ **800/942-5050** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, or 04/881-1911. Fax 04/881-1880. www.shangri-la.com. 395 units. RM700 ($203/£126) double; RM1,750 ($508/£315) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby lounge; 2 outdoor lagoon-style pools; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment and activities; children's center; game room; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; limousine service; shuttle service to Shangri-La Hotel in Georgetown; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; self-service launderette. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, Wi-Fi, fridge, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Holiday Inn Resort Penang Kids This is a recommended choice for families, but be warned this resort has little appeal for vacationing couples or singles. For families it has everything—special Kidsuites with PlayStation, fun themes, and bunk beds (in some), a Kids Club, fully supervised day care with activities and games, and a lifeguard. Older kids can join in beach volleyball, water polo, bike tours, and an assortment of watersports. Guest rooms are in two blocks: a low-rise structure near the beach and a high-rise tower along the hillside, connected by a second-story walkway. Naturally, the beachside rooms command the greater rate. Beachside rooms also have better ambience and slightly more space with wood floors and details, while tower rooms have less charm. The lack of dining options gets tiring.

72 Batu Feringgi, 11100 Penang. ✆ **04/881-1601.** Fax 04/881-1389. www.holidayinnpenang.com. 358 units. RM450–RM550 ($131–$160/£81–£99) hill-view double; RM530–RM650 ($154–$189/£95–£117) seaview double; RM800 ($232/£144) Kidsuite; from RM800 ($232/£144) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby lounge; outdoor pool and children's pool; outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center; watersports equipment rentals; children's club; game room; concierge; tour desk; limousine service; room service; massage; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, iron, safe.

Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa ★★★ Rasa Sayang was the first resort to be built along Batu Feringgi, so it commands the best beach of all the resorts, with 12 hectares (30 acres) of grounds—enough for a par-3 executive golf course, two pools, and plenty of gardens, plus two wings of guest rooms, Rasa and Garden. Standard rooms are gorgeous, most with sea views, in contemporary style and natural tones, deep wood built-ins, and big fluffy beds. In the Rasa Wing, guest rooms have private verandas and gardens, or balconies with tubs outside. Rasa Sayang also launched the Shangri-La's new spa brand, CHI, with decor and treatments based on Chinese principles of yin and yang and the five elements.

Batu Feringgi Beach, 11100 Penang. ✆ **800/942-5050** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, or 04/888-8888. Fax 04/881-1880. www.shangri-la.com. 304 units. RM1,491 ($432/£268) double; RM2,266 ($657/£408) Rasa Wing double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 outdoor lagoon-style pools; outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment and activities; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; limousine service; free shuttle service to Shangri-La Hotel in Georgetown; business center; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; self-service launderette. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, fridge, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

WHERE TO DINE

The 1885 ★★ CONTINENTAL If you're celebrating a special occasion while in Penang, the 1885 will make the experience beyond memorable. The nostalgic romance of the E&O Hotel, its colonial architecture, interiors, and manicured lawns evoking times when tigers probably roamed the grounds after dark, provides the most incredible backdrop for a perfect meal. From an ever-changing menu, poultry, special cuts of meats, and fresh seafood are prepared in delicate contemporary Western style. Candlelight, starched linens, silver service, and extremely attentive staff create a magical experience. The wine list is extensive. By Malaysian standards, this is an expensive meal, but if you compare the quality of the service, cuisine, and surroundings, you will never find such elegance for this price in Europe or the States. English afternoon teas are also superb. Men are asked to wear a shirt with a collar.

Eastern & Oriental Hotel (E&O), 10 Lebuh Farquhar. ✆ **04/222-0000.** Reservations recommended. Main courses RM60–RM180 ($17–$52/£11–£32). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 7–10:30pm.

Mama's Nyonya Restaurant ★ Finds NYONYA Those who crave Penang's most famous culinary style of Nyonya food (or Peranakan) have to visit this cozy family-run restaurant in Abu Siti Lane. Ruby, one of the four sisters who run the place, learned her cooking from her mother, hence the name. It's authentic, as Mama keeps a watchful eye on her protégés although she no longer cooks. All the favorite Nyonya dishes are on the menu—try *tau eu bak, purut ikan,* Nyonya fish-head curry, and *otak otak.* Look like a tourist, and someone will help you negotiate the menu.

31-D, Abu Siti Lane, Georgetown. ✆ **04/229-1318.** Main courses RM10–RM25 ($2.90–$7.25/£1.80–£4.50). No credit cards. Tues–Sun 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–9:30pm.

May Garden Restaurant CANTONESE This is a top Cantonese restaurant in Georgetown, and while it's noisy and not too big on ambience, it has excellent food. Outstanding dishes include the tofu and broccoli topped with sea snail slices or the fresh steamed live prawns. They also have suckling pig and Peking duck. Don't agree to all the daily specials or you'll be paying a fortune.

70 Jalan Penang. ✆ **04/261-6435.** Reservations recommended. Main courses start at RM15 ($4.35/£2.70). Seafood is priced by weight in kilograms. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm and 6–10:30pm.

Ocean Green ★★ SEAFOOD If the beautiful sea view and ocean breezes don't fulfill every vacation expectation, the succulent seafood certainly will. A long list of fresh seafood is steamed or fried, with your choice of chile, black-bean, sweet-and-sour, or curry sauces. The lobster thermidor is expensive but divine. Baked crab with cheese is also highly recommended.

48F Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah. ✆ **04/226-2681.** Reservations recommended. Main courses start at RM15 ($4.35/£2.70). Seafood is priced according to market value. AE, MC, V. Daily 9am–11pm.

Food Stall Dining

No discussion of Penang dining would be complete without mentioning the local food stall scene, which is famous. Penang hawkers can make any dish you've had in Malaysia, Singapore, or even southern Thailand—only better. Penang may be attractive for many things—history, culture, nature—but it is loved for its food.

Gurney Drive food stalls, toward the water just down from the intersection with Jalan Kelawai, is the biggest and most popular hawker center. It has all kinds of food, including local dishes with every influence: Chinese, Malay, Indian. Find *char kway teow*

(fried flat noodles with seafood), *char bee hoon* (a fried thin rice noodle), *laksa* (noodles and seafood in a tangy and spicy broth), *murtabak* (mutton, egg, and onion fried inside Indian bread and dipped in *dhal*), *oh chien* (oyster omelet with chile dip), and *rojak* (a spicy fruit and seafood salad). After you've eaten your way through Gurney Drive, you can try the stalls on Jalan Burmah near the Lai Lai Supermarket.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

In Georgetown

Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion ★★★ Cheong Fatt Tze (1840–1917), once dubbed "China's Rockefeller" by the *New York Times,* built a vast commercial empire in Southeast Asia, first in Indonesia, then in Singapore. He came to Penang in 1890 and continued his success, giving some of his spoils to build schools throughout the region. His mansion, where he lived with his eight wives, was built between 1896 and 1904.

The mansion is a sight to behold. Every corner is dripping with ambience, outfitted throughout with stained glass, carved moldings, gilded wood-carved doors, ceramic ornaments, lovely courtyard and gardens, plus seven staircases.

Guided tours explain the history, personalities, and culture behind the home, plus the details of the conservation efforts. If you're really hooked, accommodations are available.

14 Lebuh Leith. ✆ **04/262-0006.** Admission RM12 ($3.50/£2.15). Daily guided tours at 11am and 3pm.

Fort Cornwallis Fort Cornwallis is built on the site where Capt. Francis Light, founder of Penang, first landed in 1786. The fort was first built in 1793, but this site was an unlikely spot to defend the city from invasion. In 1810 it was rebuilt in an attempt to make up for initial strategic-planning errors. In the shape of a star, the only actual buildings still standing are the outer walls, a gunpowder magazine, and a small Christian chapel. The magazine houses an exhibit of old photos and historical accounts of the old fort.

Lebuh Light. No phone. Adults RM3 (90¢/50p), children RM2 (60¢/35p). Daily 8am–7pm.

Goddess of Mercy Temple Dedicated jointly to Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and Ma Po Cho, the patron saint of sea travelers, this is the oldest Chinese temple in Penang. On the 19th of each second, sixth, and ninth month of the lunar calendar (the months that fall between Feb/Mar, June/July, and Sept/Oct, respectively), Kuan Yin is celebrated with Chinese operas and puppet shows.

Leboh Pitt. Free admission.

Kapitan Kling Mosque Captain Light donated a large parcel of land on this spot for the settlement's sizable Indian Muslim community to build a mosque and graveyard. The leader of the community, known as Kapitan Kling (or Keling, which ironically was once a racial slur against Indians in the region), built a brick mosque here. Later, in 1801, he imported builders and materials from India for a new, brilliant mosque. Expansions in the 1900s topped the mosque with stunning domes and turrets.

Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling (Leboh Pitt). Free admission.

Khoo Kongsi ★ The Chinese who migrated to Southeast Asia created clan associations in their new homes. Based on common heritage, these social groups formed the core of Chinese life in the new homelands. The Khoo clan, who immigrated from Hokkien province in China, acquired this spot in 1851 and set to work building row houses, administrative buildings, and a clan temple around a large square. The temple here now was actually built in 1906 after a fire destroyed its predecessor. It was believed the original was too ornate, provoking the wrath of the gods. One look at the current temple, a

Chinese baroque masterpiece, and you'll wonder how that could possibly be. Come here in August for Chinese operas.

18 Cannon Sq. ✆ **04/261-4609.** Free admission. Daily 9am–5pm.

Penang Museum and Art Gallery ★★ The historical society has put together this marvelous collection of ethnological and historical findings from Penang, tracing the port's history and diverse cultures through time. It's filled with paintings, photos, costumes, and antiques among much more, all presented with fascinating facts and trivia. Upstairs is an art gallery. Originally the Penang Free School, the building was built in two phases, the first half in 1896 and the second in 1906. Only half of the building remains; the other was bombed to the ground in World War II. Its recent renovation has added life, at least to the exterior. It's a favorite stop on a sightseeing itinerary because it's air-conditioned.

Lebuh Farquhar. ✆ **04/261-3144.** Admission RM1 (30¢/20p). Sat–Thurs 9am–5pm.

St. George's Church Built by Rev. R. S. Hutchins (who was also responsible for the Free School next door, home of the Penang Museum) and Capt. Robert N. Smith, whose paintings hang in the museum, this church was completed in 1818. Although the outside is almost as it was then, the contents were completely looted during World War II. All that remains are the font and the bishop's chair.

Lebuh Farquhar. Free admission.

Sri Mariamman Temple This Hindu temple was built in 1833 by a Chettiar, a group of southern Indian Muslims, and received a major face-lift in 1978 with the help of Madras sculptors. The Hindu Navarathiri festival is held here, whereby devotees parade Sri Mariamman, a Hindu goddess worshiped for her powers to cure disease, through the streets in a night procession. It is also the star ting point of the Thaipusam Festival, which leads to a temple on Jalan Waterfall.

Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling. Free admission.

Outside Georgetown

Batu Muang Fishing Village This village is special for its shrine to Admiral Cheng Ho, the early Chinese sea adventurer.

Southeast tip of Penang. Free admission. From Georgetown take the Jelutong Expwy., then take Teluk Tempoyak into the village.

Botanical Gardens Covering 30 hectares (70 acres) of landscaped grounds, this botanical garden was established by the British in 1884, with grounds that are perfect for a shady walk and a ton of fun if you love monkeys. They're crawling all over the place and will think nothing of stepping forward for a peanut (which you can buy beneath the do not feed the monkeys sign). Also in the gardens is a jogging track and kiddie park. The gardens are important for tropical research.

About a 5- or 10-min. drive west of Georgetown. ✆ **04/227-0428.** Free admission. Daily 7am–7pm.

Penang Butterfly Farm The Penang Butterfly Farm, located toward the northwest corner of the island, is the largest in the world. On its .8-hectare (2-acre) landscaped grounds there are more than 4,000 flying butterflies from 120 species. At 10am and 3pm there are informative butterfly shows. Don't forget the insect exhibit—there are about 2,000 or so bugs.

Jalan Teluk Bahang. ✆ **04/885-1253.** Admission adults RM20 ($5.80/£3.60), children RM10 ($2.90/£1.80), free for children 4 and under. Daily 9am–5:30pm.

Penang Hill Covered with jungle and 20 nature trails, the hill is great for trekking. Or, you can go to Ayer Hitam, a town in central Penang, and take the Keretapi Bukit Bendera funicular railway to the top. It sends trains up and down the hill every half-hour from 6am to 9pm, weekends from 6am to 11pm, and costs adults RM4 ($1.15/70p) and children RM2 (60¢/35p), round-trip. In 2008 the train was closed for repairs, so check with the local Tourism Malaysia office before you head out. If you prefer to make the trek on foot, go to the "Moon Gate" at the entrance to the Botanical Garden for a 5.5km ($3^1/_2$-mile), 3-hour hike to the summit.

A 20- to 30-min. drive southwest from Georgetown. The funicular station is on Jalan Stesen Keretapi Bukit.

SHOPPING

The first place anyone here will recommend you to go for shopping is **KOMTAR.** Short for "Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak," it is the largest shopping complex in Penang, four stories of clothing shops, restaurants, and large department stores. For those staying in Batu Feringgi resorts, **Gurney Plaza** (✆ **04/228-1111**) is close by.

Good shopping finds in Penang are batik, pewter products, locally produced curios, paintings, antiques, pottery, and jewelry. If you care to walk around in search of finds, there are a few streets in Georgetown that are the hub of shopping activity. In the city center, the area around Jalan Penang, Lebuhraya Campbell, Lebuhraya Kapitan Keling, Lebuhraya Chulia, and Lebuhraya Pantai is near the Sri Mariamman Temple, the Penang Museum, the Kapitan Keling Mosque, and other sites of historical interest. Here you'll find everything from local crafts to souvenirs and fashion, and maybe even a bargain or two. Most of these shops are open from 10am to 10pm daily.

Out at Batu Feringgi, the main road turns into a fun **night bazaar** every evening just at dark. During the day, there are also some good shops for batik and souvenirs.

PENANG AFTER DARK

Farquhar's Bar (✆ **04/222/2000;** daily 11am–11pm) may be as close as many will come to exploring the E&O Hotel. Live the life of a colonialist, enjoying pub grub and cool drinks. Possibly the most notorious bar in Penang is the **Hong Kong Bar,** 371 Lebuh Chulia (✆ **04/261-9796**), which opened in 1920 and was a regular hangout for military personnel based in Butterworth. It has an extraordinary archive of photos of the servicemen who have patronized the place throughout the years, plus a collection of medals, plaques, and buoys from ships.

7 LANGKAWI ★★

Where the beautiful Andaman Sea meets the Strait of Malacca, Langkawi Island positions itself as one of the best emerging island paradise destinations in the region. Since 1990, the Malaysian Tourism Board has dedicated itself to promoting the island and developing it as an ideal travel spot. Now, after a decade and a half of work, the island has proven itself as one of this country's holiday gems.

Note: Malaysia has declared Langkawi a duty-free zone, so take a peek at some of the shopping in town, and enjoy RM4 ($1.10/60p) beers.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Malaysia Airlines** (✆ **1300/883-000;** www.malaysiaairlines.com) and **AirAsia** (✆ **03/8775-4000;** www.airasia.com) make Langkawi very convenient from

THAILAND
Langkawi Island
PENINSULAR MALAYSIA
Kuala Lumpur
0 100 mi
0 100 km
SINGAPORE
Straits of Chinchin
Tanjung Rhu
0 3 mi
0 3 km
Tk. Mempelam
Pulau Langgun
Tk. Chira Mati
Selat P. Peluru
Pulau Dendang
Datai Bay
Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation
Pasir Hitam
Padang Lalang
Datai Bay Golf Course
S. Datai
Langkawi Craft and Cultural Complex
Waterfall
S. Tama Besar
Telaga Tujuh Waterfall
Mt. Machincang
S. Perangin
112
113
Strait of Malacca
Kuala Teriang
Mt. Raya
Tk. Belangkas
Kisap
Pantai Kok
Market
Ulu Melaka
Padang Matsirat
Lookout Point
Makam Mahsuri Tomb
115
120
Hospital
112
Kuah
Straits of Panchor
Pulau Rebak Besar
Kedawang
Palau Timun
Views from Fishing Village
Palau Chorong
Temoyang
108
Kuala Kedah
Kuala Perlis
117
Pantai Cenang
Pantai Tengah
Pulau Dayang Bunting
Beach
Ferry routes
The Andaman 1
Four Seasons Langkawi 7
Frangipani Langkawi Resort & Spa 4
Nam Restaurant 2
Pelangi Beach Resort 3
Tanjung Rhu Resort 6
The Westin Langkawi Resort & Spa 5

 either mainland Malaysia or Singapore. In addition, **Silk Air (Singapore)** also flies to Langkawi International Airport (✆ **04/955-1311**).

The best way from the airport is to prearrange a shuttle pickup from your resort; otherwise you can grab a taxi in front of the airport. To Pantai Cenang or Pantai Tengah, the fare should be about RM20 ($5.80/£3.60), while to the resorts at Tanjung Rhu and Datai Bay it will be RM45 and RM55 ($13–$16/£8.10–£9.90), respectively.

BY TRAIN Taking the train can be a bit of a hassle because the nearest stop (in Alor Star) is quite far from the jetty to the island, requiring a cab transfer. Still, if you prefer rail, hop on the overnight train from KL (the only train), which will put you in to Alor Star at around 7am. Just outside the train station you can find the taxi stand, with cabs to take you to the Kuala Kedah jetty for the ferry ride to Kuah.

BY BUS If you're coming from KL, the bus ride is long and uncomfortable, catching the taxi transfer to the jetty can be problematic, and by the time you reach the island you'll need a vacation from your vacation. Fly or use the train. If you're coming from Penang, the direct ferry is wonderfully convenient, as are a few flights per day.

BY FERRY From the jetty at Kuala Kedah, there are about five companies that provide ferry service to the island (trip time: about 1 hr. and 45 min.; cost: RM25/$7.25/£4.50). Ferries let you off at the main ferry terminal in Kuah, where you can hop a taxi to your resort for RM20 to RM50 ($5.80–$15/£3.60–£9).

Ferries also ply between Penang and Langkawi. **Langkawi Ferry** has two early morning ferries from Weld Quay in Georgetown for RM60 ($17/£11) one-way and RM115 ($33/£21) round-trip. Call them in Penang at ✆ **04/264-2088,** or visit their office across from the clock to wer. If you're heading from Langkawi to Penang, you can call them in Langkawi at ✆ **04/966-3779.**

GETTING AROUND

BY TAXI Taxis generally hang around at the airport, the main jetty, the taxi stand in Kuah, and at some major hotels. From anywhere in between, your best bet is to ask your hotel's concierge to call a taxi for you. Keep in mind, if you're going as far as one side of the island to the other, your fare can go as high as RM50 ($15/£9).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE RENTAL At the airport and from agents in the complex behind the main jetty, car rentals can be arranged starting at RM80 ($23/£14) per day. This is for the standard, no-frills model. Insurance policies are lax, as are rental regulations. If you're out on the beach at Cenang or Tengah, a few places rent jeeps and motorcycles from RM80 ($23/£14) per day and RM30 ($8.70/£5.40) per day, respectively. Pick a good helmet. ***Note:*** If you have an accident, you could be responsible for all repairs, but resorts usually rent cars that are insured.

BY FOOT The main beaches at Cenang and Tengah can be walked quite nicely; however, don't expect to be able to walk around to other parts of the island.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Tourism Malaysia office is unfortunately situated in Kuah town on Jalan Persiaran Putra, far from the beach areas. For specific queries, you can call them at ✆ **04/966-7789.** If you're arriving by plane, there's another office at the airport (✆ **04/955-7155**).

FAST FACTS: LANGKAWI

The only major **bank** branches are located far from the beach areas, in Kuah, mostly around the blocks across the street from the Night Hawker Center (off Jalan Persiaran

Putra)—there is an ATM at the airport. Money changers keep long hours out at Pantai Cenang and Pantai Tengah, but for other resorts you'll have to change your money at the resort. Along the Pantai Cenang and Pantai Tengah main road, you'll find at least a half-dozen small **Internet** places.

WHERE TO STAY

The Andaman ★★ Kids You will be surprised how large this resort is; its buildings blend so perfectly with the jungle surrounding them. Andaman has a sprawl of lush grounds hugging a beautiful white beach. Rooms quite pleasantly look into the coastal forests and their native fauna, with glimpses of the sea. The Andaman welcomes families and has special facilities, including a kids' club, and it has a safe, shallow beach. Guest rooms, in two wings that span out to either side of the main building, are big, with wall-to-wall carpeting and Western-style decor, save a few local textiles for effect. Ground-floor lanai rooms have a private sun deck with umbrella stand. The pool is huge with lots of shady spots, and the spa features traditional Malay herbal beauty and health treatments.

Jalan Teluk Datai, P.O. Box 94, 07000 Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **04/959-1088.** Fax 04/959-1168. www.theandaman.com. RM990–RM1,970 ($287–$571/£178–£355) double; from RM2,250 ($653/£405) suite. Prices jump Dec–Jan. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pools surrounded by gardens; golf course; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center; spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; nonmotorized watersports equipment; mountain bike rental; games; concierge; limousine service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; jungle trekking. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and DVD player, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Four Seasons Langkawi ★★★ Every detail of this resort is perfectly exotic, influenced by contemporary Moorish style. Pavilion rooms are surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows and wraparound verandas. Under soaring ceilings, huge bedrooms have wood floors, ceiling fans, carved-wood detailing, and plush, soft furnishings. Through double doors, huge bathrooms are majestic, with oversize terrazzo tubs and a huge clothes closet. Throughout the rooms you'll find touches such as lanterns, hammered bronze work, lovely toiletries on marble pedestals, and cozy throw pillows that add an intimate Middle Eastern flavor. The resort has two infinity pools that look like they're spilling onto the beach, which is a long, wide stretch of perfect sand. Every dining venue fronts the beach. At Rhu Bar, cocktails are served with Turkish water pipes, amid Indian Mogul hanging swings, glowing lanterns, and Moorish carved latticework arches that frame the sea view gorgeously. The spa has private villas with tubs for four, space for floor and table massages, private indoor/outdoor showers, and changing rooms all encased in glass with lovely garden views.

Jalan Tanjung Rhu, 07000 Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **800/332-3442** in the U.S., 800/268-6282 in Canada, or 04/950-8888. Fax 04/950-8899. www.fourseasons.com. $600–$685 pavilion; from $875 villa. Prices jump Dec–Jan. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 outdoor pools; tennis; fitness center; spa w/yoga and juice bar; complimentary nonmotorized watersports; children's center; concierge; limousine service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; library and tour services; jungle trekking. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, Wi-Fi, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Frangipani Langkawi Resort & Spa ★ This small resort packs a big punch and has already won several awards for its green efforts. It's got a great location with a 400m (1,312-ft.) beachfront with restaurants, shops, and bars at the front entrance. There are rooms in two-story blocks, but the best choices are the sea-facing villas with rooftop showers. All are tastefully furnished, and the Coco Beach Bar is the best place to view spectacular sunsets.

Jalan Teluk Baru, Pantai Tengah, 07100 Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **04/952-0000.** Fax 04/952-0001. www.frangipanilangkawi.com. 118 units. RM483 ($140/£87) double; from RM650 ($189/£117) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 outdoor pools; massage; concierge; tour desk; watersports; gift shop; room service; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Pelangi Beach Resort ★ For those who prefer a more active vacation or are looking for a resort that's more family oriented, we recommend Pelangi. A top-quality resort, this place stands out from neighboring five-star resorts for its sheer fun. A long list of organized sports and leisure pastimes makes it especially attractive for families, but children are not a distraction here. Pelangi's wooden chalets are huge inside and are divided into one, two, or four guest rooms. You'll be welcomed by vaulted ceilings, modern bathrooms, and large living spaces. In addition, Pelangi's location, near the central beach strip for island life, means you're not cloistered away from the rest of civilization.

Pantai Cenang, 07000 Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **04/952-8888.** Fax 04/952-8899. www.pelangibeachresort.com. 350 units. RM1,000 ($290/£180) double; from RM1,850 ($537/£333) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; 2 large outdoor pools w/swim-up bar; golf nearby; minigolf course; outdoor lighted tennis courts; squash courts; fitness center w/sauna, steam, and massage; Jacuzzi; concierge; tour desk and watersports center w/equipment rental, boating excursions, and jungle trekking; car-rental desk; limousine service; shuttle service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Tanjung Rhu Resort ★★ The beach at Tanjung Rhu is a wide crescent of dazzlingly pure sand wrapped around a perfect crystal azure bay. Tree-lined karst islets jut up from the sea, dotting the horizon. This resort claims 440 hectares (1,100 acres) of jungle in this part of the island, monopolizing the scene for extra privacy, but it has its pros and cons. Guest rooms are enormous and decorated with sensitivity to the environment, from natural materials to organic recycled-paper-wrapped toiletries. A second pool and spa facility add value. The cons? The resort is a little isolated, so guests will be locked into using the resort restaurants. This isn't all bad as the food is good and they offer packages enabling access to all outlets and menus.

Tanjung Rhu, Mukim Ayer Hangat, 07000 Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **04/959-1033.** Fax 04/959-1899. www.tanjungrhu.com.my. 136 units. RM1,425 ($413/£257) double; RM2,850 ($827/£513) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar and library; 2 outdoor pools, 1 salt water and 1 freshwater; golf nearby; outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center and spa w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, massage; concierge; activity desk w/watersports (nonmotorized), trekking, and boat tours; limousine service; shuttle service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-room video w/movie library, CD player, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

The Westin Langkawi Resort & Spa ★★★ Kids The first Westin-branded resort in Southeast Asia is located close to the township of Kuah. The resort is located along a reasonable beach, but it is the swimming pools that will appeal to most guests. It has majestic views of the Andaman Sea and several of the islands in the archipelago. It doesn't get much better than cocktails in Breeze Lounge around sunset. All rooms and villas are contemporarily designed; the villas are spacious and include a private plunge pool. All rooms feature the Westin's signature Heavenly Bed. This is a great resort for kids who will love the pools and kids' club.

Jalan Pantai Dato Syed Omar, Langkawi, Kedah. ✆ **800/937-8461** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/656-535 in Australia, 800/490-375 in New Zealand, 800/325-95959 in the U.K., or 04/960-8888. Fax 966-3097. www.westin.com/langkawi. 222 units, AE, DC, MC, V. RM2,000 ($580/£360); from RM3,800 ($1,102/£684)

suite. The resort is located a 30-min. drive from the airport and 5 min. from Kuah. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; pool bar; 4 outdoor pools; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; Westin Workout (fitness center) w/Jacuzzi; sauna; Heavenly Spa; spa bar; watersports; bike rental; concierge; limousine service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, 42-in. plasma TV w/satellite programming, DVD player and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

WHERE TO DINE

If you're out at one of the more secluded resorts, chances are you'll stay there for most of your meals. If you find yourself at Pantai Cenang, try **Nam Restaurant** (✆ **04/955-6787**), the best restaurant on Langkawi and perhaps in all of Malaysia. Located within the small and charming Bon Ton Resort, Nam serves "West meets spice" dishes along with an excellent selection of wines and dreamy desserts in a Balinese-inspired setting. Arrive at sunset for predinner drinks, and stay after your meal for drinks at the resort's fun Chin Chin bar. In Kuah town, the best local dining experience can be found at the evening **hawker stalls** just along the waterfront near the taxi stand. A long row of hawkers cook up every kind of local favorite, including seafood dishes. You can't get any cheaper or more laid-back. From here it's easy to flag down a taxi back to your resort.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Fifteen years ago, Langkawi was just a backwater island supporting small fishing communities. When the government came in with big money to develop the place for tourism, they thought they needed a catch, so they dug up some old moldy "legends" about the island and have tried to market them as bona fide cultural attractions. Basically, these attractions appeal more to local tourists.

In terms of beaches and watersports, most resorts are self-contained units, offering their own equipment rentals and planning their own outings.

Outside of your resort, there's some fairly decent diving to be had. **Asian Overland** (✆ **04/955-2002;** www.asianoverland.com.my) can arrange day trips with two dives to Payar Marine Park within Langkawi's extensive island network. They charge RM280 ($81/£50). You can also snorkel for the day for RM160 ($46/£29) per person. There's an interesting snorkel attraction off Langkawi—a platform in the middle of the sea that floats above a coral reef. Day trips to the platform include rides in a glass-bottomed boat, snorkeling, and lunch on the platform. It's an all-day affair for RM230 ($67/£41) per person, starting at 8am and getting you back to your resort just before dinnertime.

Asian Overland also plans round-island boat trips to "island-hop" at beaches and into mangrove swamps (interesting) with a stop at the Pregnant Maiden Lake (one of the before-mentioned overhyped places). The mangrove tours are very educational, but ask them to show you the eagles, not feed them. They'll tailor your tour so you can see the sights that most interest you.

The best thing going for Langkawi is that the island's natural assets have been preserved despite the modern infrastructure to accommodate tourists. Unlike Bali and Phuket, visitors can relax on the beaches and not be hassled by hawkers trying to sell things.

One piece of infrastructure that stands out is the cable car that extends to the summit of Mount Macinchang. It's a dramatic, near vertical lift high above the rainforest canopy to the 706m-high (2,316-ft.) rocky summit. From here visitors can see most of the island's attractions and peer off into the distant islands of southern Thailand. The departure point for the ride is Oriental Village at Burau Bay. There is a carnival-like atmosphere here with restaurants and souvenir shops that all seem to sell basically the same items. The 14-minute ride to the summit is one of the world's steepest at 42 degrees and

it has the longest free-span single rope cable in the world. At the top there is a 125m (410-ft.) curved platform across a deep chasm. Open Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday 10am to 6pm; Wednesday noon to 6pm; Friday to Sunday 9:30am to 7pm. Call ✆ **04/959-4225** for more information. Prices are RM25 ($7.25/£4.50) adults, RM18 ($5.20/£3.25) children.

Sailors will enjoy visiting one of four marinas in Langkawi. The international charter company **Sunsail** (✆ **04/966-5869;** www.sunsailmalaysia.com) operates from Royal Langkawi Yacht Club on Jalan Dato Syed Omar, where avid sailors can rent yachts to sail around the islands, or to Phuket in neighboring Thailand.

Perhaps one of the loveliest additions to Langkawi's attractions is the **Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation,** Pasir Tengkorak, Jalan Datai (✆ **04/959-4669**). The artistic devotion of the foundation's namesake fueled the creation of this enchanting modern space designed to showcase Malaysia's contribution to the international fine-arts scene. If you can pull yourself from the beach for any one activity in Langkawi, this should be it. Mr. Hussein has created a museum worthy of international attention. It's open Saturday through Thursday from 10am to 6pm; adults pay RM12 ($3.50/£2.15), children visit for free.

SHOPPING

Langkawi's designated Duty Free Port status makes shopping here quite fun and very popular. In Kuah town, two shopping malls, **Langkawi Parade** (Jalan Kelibang; ✆ **04/966-6372**) and **Langkawi Fair** (Persiaran Putra; ✆ **04/969-8100**), both in Kuah town, are filled with duty-free shopping. For local handicrafts, the **Langkawi Craft and Cultural Complex** (Jalan Teluk Yu; ✆ **04/959-1913;** daily 10am–6pm) sells an assortment of batik, baskets, ceramic, silver jewelry, brassware, and more, and also has daily crafts demonstrations and cultural shows.

8 EAST MALAYSIA: BORNEO

Borneo for the past 2 centuries has been the epitome of adventure travel. Today, the island still draws visitors who seek new and unusual experiences, and few leave disappointed. Rivers meander through dense tropical rainforests, beaches stretch for miles, and caves snake out longer than any in the world. All sorts of creatures live in the rainforest: deer the size of house cats, owls only 6 inches tall, the odd proboscis monkey, and the endangered orangutan, whose only other natural home is Sumatra. It's also home to the largest flower in the world, the rafflesia, spanning up to 1m (3 1/4 ft.) wide.

The people of Borneo can be credited for most of the alluring tales of early travels. The exotically adorned tribes of warring headhunters and pirates of yesteryear, some of whom still live lifestyles little changed (though both headhunting and piracy are now illegal), today share their mysterious cultures and colorful traditions openly with outsiders.

Add to all of this the fabulous tale of the White Raja of Sarawak, Sir James Brooke, whose family ruled the state for more than 100 years, and you have a land filled with allure, mystery, and romance unlike any other.

Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Indonesia have divided the island of Borneo. Indonesia claims Kalimantan to the south and east, while the Malaysian states of **Sarawak** and **Sabah** lie to the north and northwest. The small sultanate of Brunei is nestled between the two Malaysian states on the western coastline.

SARAWAK ★★★ & KUCHING

Tropical rainforest accounts for more than 70% of the total land mass of **Sarawak,** providing homes for not only exotic species of plants and animals, but also the myriad ethnic groups who are indigenous to the area. With more than 10 national parks and four wildlife preserves, Malaysia shows its commitment to conserving the delicate balance of life here, while still allowing small gateways for travelers to appreciate natural wonders. The national parks located around the state's capital, **Kuching,** provide quick access to forest life, while longer, more detailed trips to northern Sarawak lead you deeper into the jungle to explore remote forests and extensive ancient cave networks. A web of rivers connects the inland areas to the main towns, and a boat trip from Kuching to visit tribal communities and trek into the surrounding forests is the most memorable attraction going.

The perfect introduction to Sarawak begins in its capital. Kuching's museums, cultural exhibits, and historic attractions will help you form an overview of the history, people, and natural wonders of the state. In Kuching, your introduction to Sarawak will be comfortable and fun—culture by day, good food and fun by night. Kuching, meaning "cat" in Malay, also has a wonderful sense of humor, featuring monuments and exhibits to its feline mascot on almost every corner.

GETTING THERE Almost all travelers to Sarawak enter through **Kuching International Airport** (✆ **082/454-242**), just outside the city. **Malaysia Airlines** (✆ **1300/883-000;** www.malaysiaairlines.com) has international flights from Singapore, with domestic service from KL, Johor Bahru, and Kota Kinabalu. **AirAsia** (✆ **03/8775-4000;** www.airasia.com) flies between Kuching and KL.

The relatively new airport is a terrific facility with ATMs, money changers, restaurants, and tourist information. Taxis from the airport use coupons that you purchase outside the arrival hall. Priced according to zones, most trips to the central parts of town will be about RM20 ($5.80/£3.60).

GETTING AROUND Centered around a *padang,* or large ceremonial field, Kuching resembles many other Malaysian cities. Buildings of beautiful colonial style rise on the edges of the field; many of these today house Sarawak's museums. The main sights, as well as the Chinatown area and the riverfront, are easily accessible on foot. Taxis are also available and do not use meters; most rides around town are quoted between RM10 and RM15 ($2.90–$4.35/£1.80–£2.70). Taxis can be waved down from the side of the road, or if you're in the Chinatown area, the main taxi stand is on Gambier Road near the end of the India Street Pedestrian Mall.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Sarawak Tourism Board's Visitor Information Centre** has literature and staff that can answer any question about activities in the state and city. This is actually the best place to start planning any trips to Sarawak's wonderful national parks, as the main office for the National Parks & Wildlife Centre operates a Visitor Information Center here as well. Both offices are incredibly informed and welcoming, so feel free to take advantage. You'll find them at the Sarawak Tourism Complex in the Old Courthouse opposite the Kuching Waterfront (Sarawak Tourism Board; ✆ **082/410-944,** National Parks Centre ✆ **082/248-088;** www.sarawaktourism.com).

FAST FACTS Sarawak's area code is 082. Major **banks** have branches on Tunku Abdul Rahman Road near Holiday Inn Kuching or in the downtown area around Khoo Hun Yeang Road. There are a few **Internet** cafes around town; it's best to ask your hotel's concierge for the nearest one before you start wandering around—or use your hotel's facilities.

Where to Stay

Hilton Kuching Located in the heart of Kuching along the riverfront, the Hilton offers panoramic views of the Sarawak River and the historic Fort Margherita on the other side. The modern, white facade is the dominant structure along the city side of the river. Guest rooms are a bit on the plain side, and dated, but well maintained. The premier views are those facing the river and then from the 10th floor upward. Hilton offers the best international service in the city.

Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kuching, 93000 Sarawak. ✆ **800/HILTONS** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/445-8667 in Australia, 300/445-866 in New Zealand, 800/448-002 in the U.K., or 82/248-200. Fax 82/428-984. www.kuching.hilton.com. 315 units. RM410 ($119/£74) double; from RM780 ($226/£140) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar and lobby lounge; outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna and steam bath; outdoor floodlit tennis courts; business center; tour desk; hair salon; souvenir shop; room service; separate nonsmoking floors. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe, IDD phones w/voice mail.

Holiday Inn Kuching Holiday Inn offers Western-style accommodations at a moderate price, and you'll appreciate its location in an excellent part of town. It sits along the bank of the Kuching River, so to get to the main riverside area you need only stroll 10

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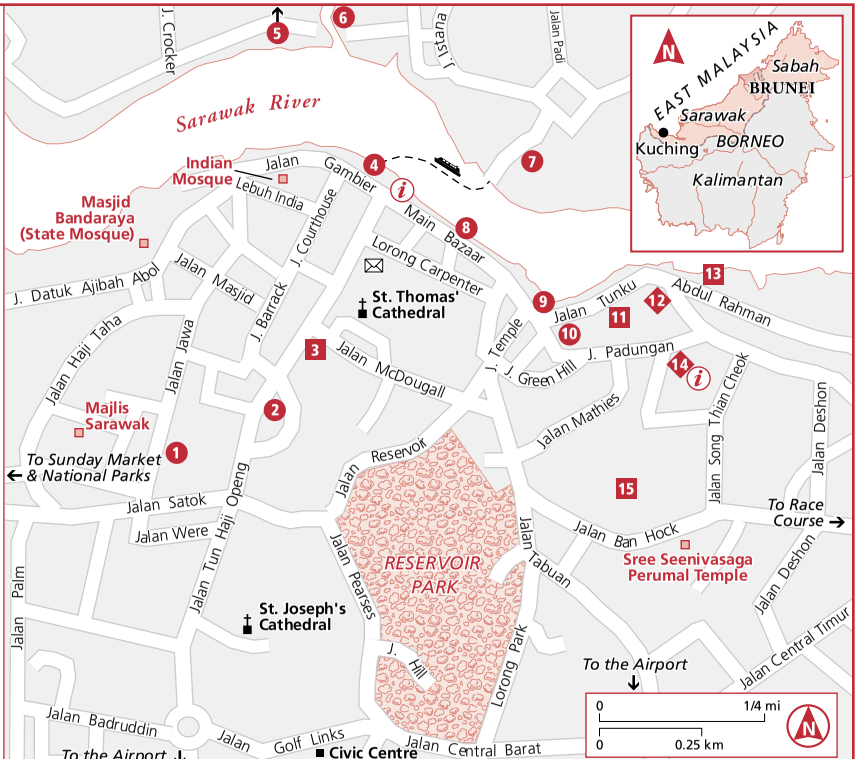

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 minutes past some of the city's historical and cultural sights, shopping, and restaurants. Catering to a diverse group of leisure travelers and businesspeople, the hotel has spacious, modern, and comfortable rooms; and although there are few bells and whistles, you won't want for convenience. The outdoor swimming pool and excellent fitness center facility will help you unwind, and the small shopping arcade has one of the best collections of books on Sarawak that can be found in the city.

P.O. Box 2928, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, 93100 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. ✆ **082/423-111.** Fax 082/426-169. www.holidayinn-sarawak.com. 305 units. RM265 ($77/£48) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center w/sauna; concierge; tour desk; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer.

Merdeka Palace Hotel & Suites ★ Towering over the Padang Merdeka in the center of town is the Merdeka Palace, practically a landmark in its own right (as soon as you see the easily distinguishable tower, you'll always know where you are). This is one of the most fashionable addresses in the city, for guests as well as banquets and functions. Its large marble lobby and staircase justifies its reputation for elegance. Rooms range from apartment suites to hotel rooms. Large rooms come dressed in European-inspired furnishings and fabrics. Try to get a view of the *padang,* as the less expensive rooms face the parking lot. The rooftop outdoor swimming pool is small, but the fully equipped fitness center has sauna and steam rooms, plus massage. The English pub here is one of the most happening in town.

Jalan Tun Abang Haji Openg, 93000 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. ✆ **082/258-000.** Fax 082/425-400. www.merdekapalace.com. 214 units. RM414 ($120/£75) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; limousine service; business center; shopping arcade; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, safe.

Telang Usan Hotel ★★ Value The Telang Usan Hotel is not as flashy as the higher-priced places, but it's a fantastic bargain for a good room. Most guests here are leisure travelers, and in fact, many are repeat visitors. The small public areas sport murals in local Iban and Orang Ulu styles, revealing the origin of the hotel's owner and operator. While rooms are small and decor is not completely up-to-date, they're spotless. Some rooms have only standing showers, so be sure to specify when making your reservation if a bathtub is important to you. The coffee shop is a fine place to try local food, but they have Western selections as well. There is an excellent tour agency under the same ownership at the hotel.

Pesiaran Ban Hock, P.O. Box 1579, 93732 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. ✆ **082/415-588.** Fax 082/245-316. www.telangusan.com. 66 units. RM140 ($41/£25) double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service; same-day laundry service; Internet service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar (some rooms).

Where to Dine

Everyone ends up at the **Top Spot Food Court,** a cheap hawker center venue on Jalan Bukit Mata off Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman just near the Holiday Inn. Various stalls cook Chinese, Malay, and Western food, all sorts of exotic dishes, and local and seafood dishes. Because the restaurant is located on the roof of a multistory parking garage, don't expect anything but "local charm" for decor. But the food is good and cheap, and you'll be sure to find a bowl of the famous Sarawak *laksa.*

A good pick for local specialties is the **Dulit Coffee House** at Telang Usan Hotel (✆ **082/415-588**). Try their local Sarawak version of *laksa,* vermicelli noodles and seafood in a rich and spicy coconut gravy, or the Sarawak black pepper steak, which is a house specialty. Entrees are reasonably priced from RM10 to RM35 ($2.90–$10/£1.80–£6.30).

Attractions

The Astana and Fort Margherita At the waterfront by the Square Tower, you'll find water taxis to take you across the river to see these two reminders of the White Rajas of Sarawak. The Astana, built in 1870 by Raja Charles Brooke, the second raja of Sarawak, is now the official residence of the governor. It is not open to the public, but visitors may still walk in the gardens. The best view of the Astana, however, is from the water.

Raja Charles Brooke's wife, Ranee Margaret, gave her name to Fort Margherita, which was erected in 1879 to protect the city of Kuching. Inside the great castlelike building is a police museum, the most interesting sights of which are the depictions of criminal punishment.

Across the Sarawak River from town. Fort: ✆ **082/244-232.** Free admission. Daily 9am–5pm.

Chinese History Museum Built in 1911, this old Chinese Chamber of Commerce building is the perfect venue for a museum that traces the history of Chinese communities in Sarawak. Though small, it's centrally located and a convenient stop while you're in the area.

Corner of Main Bazaar and Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman. Free admission. Daily 9am–5pm.

Main Bazaar Main Bazaar, the major thoroughfare along the river, is home to Kuching's antiques and handicraft shops. If you're walking along the river, a little time in these shops is like a walk through a traditional handicrafts art gallery. You'll also find souvenir shops, tour operators, and a few restaurants.

Along the river. Free admission.

Sarawak Cultural Village ★ What appears to be a contrived theme park turns out to be a really fun place to learn about Sarawak's indigenous people. Built around a lagoon, the park re-creates the various styles of longhouse dwellings of each of the major tribes. Inside each house are representative members of each tribe displaying cultural artifacts and performing music, teaching dart blowing, and showing off carving talents. Give yourself plenty of time to stick around and talk with the people, who are recruited from villages inland. Performers dance and display costumes at 11:30am and 4:30pm daily. A shuttle bus leaves at regular intervals from the Holiday Inn Kuching on Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Kampung Budaya Sarawak, Pantai Damai, Santubong. ✆ **082/846-411.** Adults RM60 ($17/£11), children RM30 ($8.70/£5.40). Daily 9am–5pm.

Sarawak Islamic Museum A splendid array of Muslim artifacts at this quiet and serene museum depicts the history of Islam and its spread to Southeast Asia. Local customs and history are also highlighted. Although women are not required to cover their heads, respectable attire that covers the legs and arms is requested.

Jalan P. Ramlee. ✆ **082/244-232.** Free admission. Sat–Thurs 9am–4:30pm; Fri 9am–12:45pm and 3–5pm.

Sarawak Museum ★ Two branches, one old and one new, display exhibits of the natural history, indigenous peoples, and culture of Sarawak, plus the state's colonial and modern history. The two branches are connected by an overhead walkway above Jalan Tun Haji Openg. The wildlife exhibit is a bit musty, but the arts and artifacts in the other sections are well tended. A tiny aquarium sits neglected behind the old branch, but the gardens here are lovely.

Jalan Tun Haji Openg. ✆ **082/244-232.** Free admission. Sat–Thurs 9am–4:30pm; Fri 9am–12:45pm and 3–4:30pm.

Square Tower The tower, built in 1879, served as a prison camp, but today the waterfront real estate is better served by an information center for travel agents. The Square Tower is also a prime starting place for a stroll along the riverside and is where you'll also find out about cultural performances and exhibitions held at the waterfront, or call the number below for performance schedules.

Jalan Gambier near the riverfront. ✆ **082/426-093.** Free admission.

Tua Pek Kong Temple At a main crossroads near the river stands the oldest Chinese temple in Sarawak. Although officially it is dated at 1876, most locals acknowledge the true date of its beginnings as 1843. It's still lively in form and spirit, with colorful dragons tumbling along the walls and incense filling the air.

Junction of Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jalan Padungan. Free admission.

Touring Local Culture ★★★

One of the highlights of a trip to Sarawak is a visit to a longhouse community. Trips can last from simple overnight stays to 2-week intensive discovery tours. It goes without saying that shorter trips only venture as far as those longhouse villages closest to Kuching. The benefit is that these communities are at ease with foreigners and so are better able to demonstrate their culture. The drawback is that these villages are the ones most trampled by coach-loads of tourists looking to gawk at "primitive tribes." Basically, the more time you have, the deeper you will venture into the interior and the more time you will have to spend with different ethnic groups allowing greater insight into these fascinating cultures.

A typical longhouse trip starts with a van ride from Kuching followed by a longtail boat ride upriver, through gorgeous forests. If you are only stopping in for the night, you'll be welcomed, fed, and entertained—the food is generally edible and always prepared under sanitary conditions. Fruits are delicious. Your guide, through translations, will help you chat with villagers and ask questions about their lifestyle and customs. At night you will sleep in a longhouse provided especially for guests. It's basic but cool, with mosquito nets (very necessary). The following day includes a brief jungle trek, plus hunting and fishing demonstrations before your departure. If your trip is longer, you will probably avoid the closer villages and head straight for more remote communities, depending on how much time (and money) you have.

Your average overnight longhouse tour will cost up to RM600 ($174/£108) per person. Good tour operators making longhouse tours are **Asian Overland Services,** 126 Green Heights Commercial Centre (✆ **082/451-1309;** www.asianoverland.com.my), and **Telang Usan Travel & Tours,** Ban Hock Road (✆ **082/236-945;** fax 082/236-589). These agencies can also arrange trips into Sarawak's national parks.

Touring Sarawak's National Parks

The Sarawak National Parks & Wildlife Centre has opened access to all of Sarawak's national parks to do-it-yourself travelers. From their booking center in Kuching, you can apply for parks permits and book reservations in state-run lodging within each park. They can also advise how to travel to and from each park: Those closer to Kuching will only involve local road and river transportation, while more remote parks will require commercial flights to either Sibu or Miri, plus transfers to ground and river transportation and even chartered flights. If you have the time to plan your travel this way, you will be rewarded with the thrill of "getting there."

Most people do not have the luxury of time, so it's recommended that you book trips that interest you through a tour operator who will arrange all transportation, parks permits, lodging, meals, and guides, freeing your time to experience the attractions themselves.

NATIONAL PARKS NOT FAR FROM KUCHING Both **Borneo Adventure** (55 Main Bazaar; ✆ **082/245-175;** www.borneoadventure.com) and **Asian Overland Services,** 126 Green Heights Commercial Centre (✆ **082/451-1309;** www.asianoverland.com.my), charge a few dollars more than many of the other local operators, but you'll get experienced guides and reliable services, and you do not need to join a huge touristy coach group. Most of these trips are for small groups. Their half-day trips from Kuching take the mystery out of local transportation—they can even be combined for longer itineraries so you can maximize your time. They can also prepare customized itineraries and special theme tours based upon your interests.

Bako National Park ★★★, established in 1957, is Sarawak's oldest national park. An area of 2,728 hectares (6,820 acres), it combines mangrove forest, lowland jungle, and high plains covered in scrub. Throughout the park you'll see the pitcher plant and other strange carnivorous plants, plus long-tailed macaques, monitor lizards, bearded pigs, and the proboscis monkey. Because the park is only 37km (22 miles) from Kuching, half-day trips here are extremely convenient. A day trip for two costs RM300 ($87/£54) per person.

Gunung Gading National Park, about a 2-hour drive west of Kuching, sprawls 4,106 hectares (10,265 acres) over rugged mountains to beautiful beach spots along the coast. Day-trippers and overnighters come to get a glimpse of the Rafflesia, the largest flower in the world. The flowers are short-lived and temperamental, but the national parks office will let you know if any are in bloom. A day tour for two people costs RM300 ($87/£54) per person.

Semenggoh Orang Utan Sanctuary is a rehabilitation center for orangutans and other endangered wildlife species, which are either orphaned or recovering from illness and are being trained for eventual release into the forest. A half-day tour for two people costs RM140 ($41/£25) per person.

NATIONAL PARKS A LITTLE FARTHER OUT **Borneo Adventure,** 55 Main Bazaar (✆ **082/245-175;** www.borneoadventure.com), and **Asian Overland Services,** 126 Green Heights Commercial Centre (✆ **082/451-1309;** www.asianoverland.com.my), also book trips to national parks in other parts of the state. You'll have to fly to Miri or Sibu, as these two towns are the hop-off points for these excursions. Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia both service these two towns from KL and Kuching.

Gunung Mulu National Park provides an amazing adventure with its astounding underground network of caves. The park claims the world's largest cave passage (Deer Cave), the world's largest natural chamber (Sarawak Chamber), and Southeast Asia's longest

cave (Clearwater Cave). No fewer than 18 caves offer explorers trips of varying degrees of difficulty, from simple treks with minimal gear to technically difficult caves that require specialized equipment and skills. Aboveground are 544 sq. km (326 sq. miles) of primary rainforest, peat swamps, and mountainous forests teeming with mammals, birds, and unusual insects. Located in the north of Sarawak, Mulu is very close to the Brunei border. Borneo Adventure has a 2-day/1-night package for RM600 ($174/£108) per person (minimum two people). The trip includes accommodations, ground transportation, longboat rides, nature guides to see Deer Cave, Sarawak Chamber, and Clearwater Cave, plus some rainforest trekking (wear a hat in the caves to protect yourself from bat droppings). They can book your flights from Kuching, but you'll have to pay extra.

SABAH ★★★ & KOTA KINABALU

Sabah presents a wonderland of awe-inspiring natural scenery and mysterious indigenous cultures. It is, in my opinion, Southeast Asia's hidden treasure. A playground for adventure seekers, extreme sportsters, and bums in search of the ultimate beach, Sabah rewards those who venture here with a holiday in an unspoiled paradise.

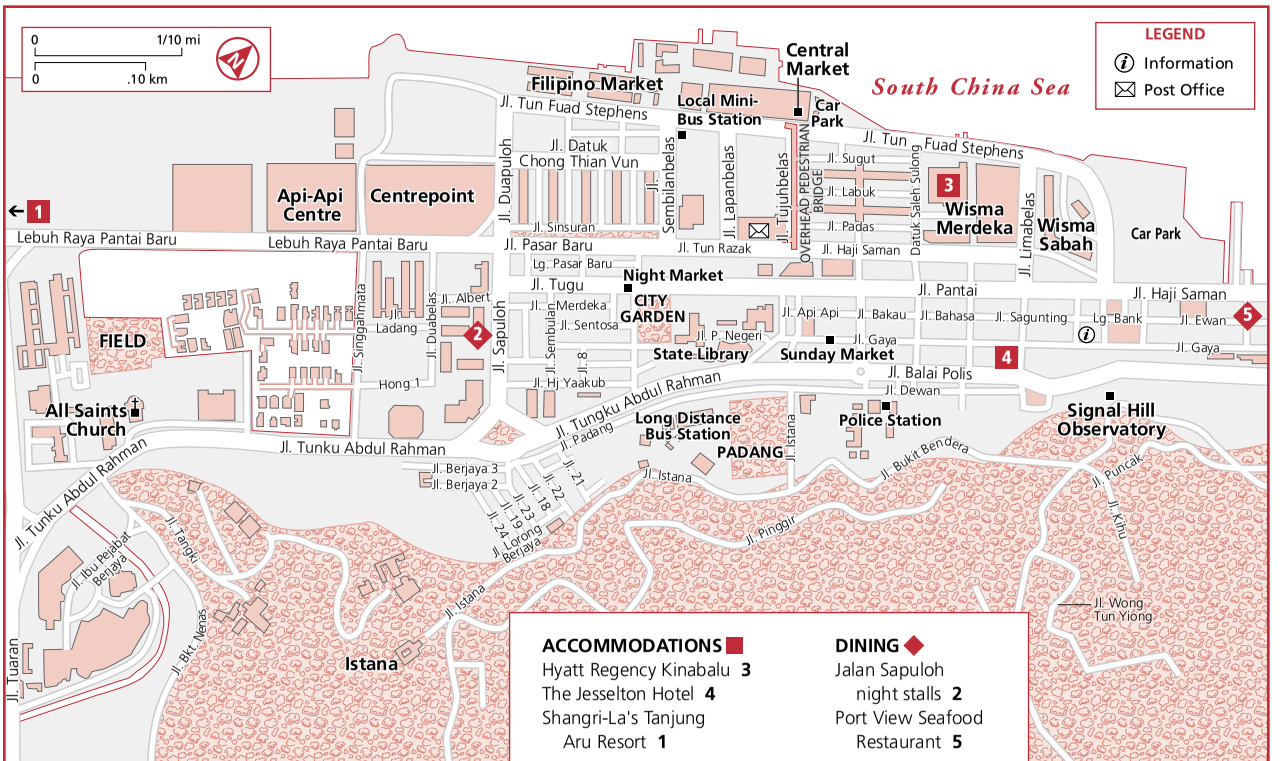
Covering 73,711 sq. km (28,747 sq. miles) of the northern part of Borneo, the world's third-largest island, Sabah stretches from the South China Sea in the west to the Sulu Sea in the east, both seas containing an abundance of uninhabited islands, postcard-perfect beaches, and pristine coral reefs bubbling with marine life. In between, more than half of the state is covered in ancient primary rainforest that's protected in national parks and forest reserves. In these forests, some rare species of mammals such as the Sumatran rhino and Asian elephant (herds of them) take effort to witness, but other animals, such as the orangutan, proboscis monkey, gibbon, lemur, civet, and Malaysian sun bear, can be seen on jungle treks. Of the hundreds of bird species here, the hornbills and herons steal the show.

Sabah's tallest peak also happens to be the highest mountain between the Himalayas and Irian Jaya. At 4,095m (13,432 ft.), **Mount Kinabalu** is the tallest in Southeast Asia, and a challenge to trek or climb. The state's interior has endless opportunities for jungle trekking, river rafting, mountain biking, and 4×4 exploration for every level of excitement, from soft adventure to extreme sports.

This state holds not only mysterious wildlife and geography, but also people as well. Sabahans count among their many ethnic groups some 32 different tribes whose cultures and traditions are vastly different from the Malay majority that makes up the rest of the country. In fact, ethnic Malays are a minority in Sabah.

Warning! Exercise Caution

In April 2000, 22 people, including 11 foreign tourists, were kidnapped from a dive resort on Sipadan Island off the east coast of Sabah. This would be the first of four incidents of kidnapping, mostly of Malaysian workers, in this area by the Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist group in the southern Philippines with known links to al-Qaeda. While Malaysia responded by placing security forces on 23 islands and six additional strategic locations, the U.S. Department of State still advises Americans to exercise caution when traveling in this area. Despite the warning, foreign visitor arrivals to Sipadan have doubled since the advisory was first issued.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LEGEND
Information
Post Office
South China Sea
Central Market
Filipino Market
Local Mini-Bus Station
Car Park
Jl. Tun Fuad Stephens
Jl. Datuk Chong Thian Vun
Jl. Duapuloh
Jl. Sembilanbelas
Jl. Lapanbelas
Jl. Tujuhbelas
OVERHEAD PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE
Jl. Sugut
Jl. Labuk
Jl. Padas
Jl. Haji Saman
Datuk Saleh Sulong
Wisma Merdeka
Wisma Sabah
Jl. Limabelas
Car Park
Api-Api Centre
Centrepoint
Lebuh Raya Pantai Baru
Jl. Sinsuran
Jl. Pasar Baru
Lg. Pasar Baru
Jl. Tun Razak
Night Market
Jl. Tugu
CITY GARDEN
Jl. Merdeka
Jl. Sentosa
Jl. Pantai
Jl. Haji Saman
Jl. Ewan
Lg. Bank
Jl. Gaya
Jl. Api Api
Jl. Bakau
Jl. Bahasa
Jl. Sagunting
Jl. P. Negeri
State Library
Sunday Market
Jl. Balai Polis
Jl. Dewan
FIELD
Jl. Singgahmata
Jl. Ladang
Jl. Albert
Jl. Dualebas
Jl. Sapulon
Jl. Sembulan
Jl. 8
Hong 1
Jl. Hj. Yaakub
All Saints Church
Jl. Tunku Abdul Rahman
Long Distance Bus Station
Jl. Padang
PADANG
Police Station
Signal Hill Observatory
Jl. Istana
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Jl. 24
Lorong Berjaya
Jl. Pinggir
Jl. Puncak
Jl. Kiru
Jl. Wong Tun Yiong
Jl. Tangki
Jl. Ibu Pejabat Berjaya
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Istana
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The Jesselton Hotel 4
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Jalan Sapuloh night stalls 2
Port View Seafood Restaurant 5

The best place to begin exploring Sabah's marine wonders, wildlife and forests, adventure opportunities, and indigenous peoples is from its capital, **Kota Kinabalu.** A speck of a city on the west coast, it's where you'll find the headquarters for all of Sabah's adventure-tour operators and package-excursion planners. Spend at least a day here to explore your options; then set out to the wilds for the adventure of a lifetime.

GETTING THERE Because of Sabah's remote location, just about everybody will arrive by air through the **Kota Kinabalu International Airport** in the capital city (✆ **088/238-555**), about a 20-minute drive south of the central part of the city. A surprising number of direct international flights connect Sabah to the region. Malaysia Airlines flies from Hong Kong, Manila, Osaka, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo, among others (✆ **1300/883-000;** www.malaysiaairlines.com), and AirAsia flies from Bangkok (✆ **03/8775-4000;** www.airasia.com).

Both airlines also have direct domestic flights to Kota Kinabalu from KL, Johor Bahru, Kuching, Sibu, and Miri, with in-state service to Sandakan and other towns.

The most efficient way to get into town from the airport is by taxi using a coupon system. You'll pay about RM15 ($4.35/£2.70) for a trip to town. Ignore the drivers that try to lure you away from the coupon counter; they will always overcharge you.

GETTING AROUND In the downtown area, you can get around quite easily on foot between hotels, restaurants, tour operators, markets, and the tourism office. For longer trips, a taxi will be necessary; in-town trips cost about RM12 ($3.50/£2.15). Taxis are flagged down on the street or by your hotel's bellhop.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Sabah Tourism Board** (51 Jalan Gaya; ✆ **088/212-121;** www.sabahtourism.com) provides the most comprehensive information about the state. It's open daily 9am to 4pm. Although Tourism Malaysia has a small office on Jalan Gaya a block down from the Sabah Tourism office, almost all of their information promotes travel in other parts of the country. Still, if you're interested, stop by Ground Floor Uni, Asia Building, no. 1 Jalan Sagunting (✆ **088/248-698**).

FAST FACTS The **area code** for Sabah is **088.** While in the same time zone as KL, the sun rises and sets earlier than on the peninsula. You'll find **banks** with ATMs conveniently located in the downtown area around Jalan Limabelas, Jalan Gaya, and Jalan Pantai. While there are no large **Internet** cafes, you'll find access in small shopfronts around the main parts of town.

Where to Stay

Hyatt Regency Kinabalu ★ One of the best international business-class hotels in town, in some ways the Hyatt seems a little out of place in cozy Kota Kinabalu. Still, it's located close to the waterfront, near major shopping and travel operators, and has a good selection of restaurants. Even if you're staying elsewhere in town, you may appreciate one of their dining options. Rooms here are large and have up-to-date furnishing styles that add to the charm of the room. Local tour and car-rental booking in the lobby make the place convenient for leisure travelers. One of the high points is Shenanigan's, a lively bar, with live entertainment. It gets packed, mostly with locals and expatriates.

Jalan Datuk Salleh Sulong, 88994 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. ✆ **800/233-1234** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/131-234 in Australia, 800/441-234 in New Zealand, or 088/221-234. Fax 088/218-909. www.kinabalu.regency.hyatt.com. 288 units. RM368 ($107/£66) double; from RM713 ($207/£128) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; fitness center; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; limousine service; business center; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning;

nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

The Jesselton Hotel ★★ It's such a nice surprise to find this quaint boutique hotel in the center of Kota Kinabalu, just about the last real reminder in this city of a colonial presence. Even more appealing is the level of personalized service you receive and the comfort of the rooms, which, though completely modern, retain their charm with lovely Audubon-style inks and attractive wallpapers and fabrics—sort of a cross between a cozy guesthouse and a top-class hotel. Due to lack of space in the building, there's no pool, fitness center, or business center, but the staff at the front desk can help you with tour information and transportation. The coffeehouse serves local and Western food, which is quite good. Bella Italia Pizzeria Ristorante Café serves Italian and local favorites.

69 Jalan Gaya, 88000 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. ✆ **088/223-333.** Fax 088/240-401. www.jesseltonhotel.com. 32 units. RM247 ($72/£45) double; RM518 ($150/£93) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar and lounge; coffee shop; tour desk; limousine service; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; complimentary clothes pressing and shoe polishing; nonsmoking rooms; currency exchange. *In room:* A/C, TV (movies available), minibar, tea-/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort & Spa ★★★ (Kids) A short ride southwest of Kota Kinabalu, and you're at Tanjung Aru, a pleasant beachside district. The Shangri-La here is located in a most impressive setting, surrounded on three sides by water. It serves the finest local Sabahan cuisine and freshest seafood you can get in the region. Book a room in the Tanjung Wing, which is nestled amid Shangri-La's signature lush garden setting, or the Kinabalu Wing, which has panoramic views of the South China Sea. Every room has a stunning view of either the sea or Mount Kinabalu, with a balcony for full appreciation. Tropical touches include furnishings in cool colors and local fabrics with wood details. Their tour desk can arrange everything from scuba to trekking and rafting. Special activities for kids make this place a good choice for families.

Locked Bag 174, 88744 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. ✆ **800/942-5050** in the U.S. and Canada, 800/222-448 in Australia, 800/442-179 in New Zealand, or 088/225-800. Fax 088/217-155. www.shangri-la.com. 499 units. RM700 ($203/£126) double; from RM1,250 ($363/£225) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; beach bar and lounge; 2 outdoor lagoon-style pools; 4 outdoor lighted tennis courts; fitness center w/Jacuzzi, sauna, steam, and massage; concierge; tour desk; shuttle service; salon; room service; babysitting; same-day laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/satellite programming and in-house movies, high-speed Internet, minibar, tea/coffeemaking facilities, hair dryer, safe.

Where to Dine

One of the best local specialties, *hinava,* is a mouthwatering delicacy of raw fish marinated in lime juice, ginger, shallots, herbs, and chiles.

Kota Kinabalu is known for its fresh seafood, and there are a lot of places to choose from, but the locals and expatriates all agree that **Port View Seafood Restaurant,** Jalan Haji Saman across from the old Customs Wharf, near the downtown area (✆ **088/252-813**), is best. Dishes are prepared primarily in Chinese and Malay styles, are moderately priced (sold by weight), and always succulent.

One of Malaysia's most exciting dining outlets is **@tmosphere,** on the 18th floor of Menara Tun Mustapha (✆ **088/425-100;** www.atmosphererestaurant.com), south of the city center. Arrive in style by helicopter to this revolving restaurant and dine on creative Pacific Rim cuisine. It becomes a lively nightspot after dinner.

Sabah attracts **scuba** enthusiasts from around the world, who come to dive at Sipadan, an island resort off the east coast of the state. **Sipadan,** ranked as one of the top-10 dive sites in the world, is actually a tall limestone "tower" rising from the bed of the Celebes Sea, supporting vast numbers of marine species, some of which may still be unidentified. Since 2004, the Malaysian government has revoked the licenses of the five dive operators that managed resorts on the tiny island in an effort to prevent environmental degradation. The dive operators will move their base camps to surrounding islands, offering day trips to the area or running live-aboard trips.

Borneo Divers (ninth floor, Menara Jubili, 53 Jalan Gaya; ✆ **088/222-226;** www.borneodivers.info) was the first full-service dive operator in Borneo and the pioneering operator to Sipadan. They house divers at their resort on Mabul, along a gorgeous sandy beach with easy access to dive sites around the Mabul island and Sipadan. For RM664 ($193/£120) per night per person, you'll get accommodations, meals, airport transfers, and two dives a day. You'll have to pay extra for a round-trip flight into Tawau, which costs about RM390 ($113/£70). Booking can be made through Borneo Divers. Equipment rentals come to RM89 ($26/£16) per day Sipadan has good diving year-round, but March through October has the best weather.

A newer spot, **Layang Layang,** located off the coast of northwest Borneo in the South China Sea, is also making a splash as an underwater bounty of marine life. **Layang Layang Island Resort** (head office in KL at Block A, ground floor, A-0-3, Megan Ave. II, 12 Jalan Yap Kwan Seng; ✆ **03/2162-2877;** www.layanglayang.com) pioneered this area for divers. Their standard package of 6 days/5 nights runs RM1,250 ($363/£225) per person, which includes accommodations, meals, and three dives a day. Equipment is extra, as is the chartered helicopter flight to the island, which is expensive at RM969 ($281/£174) round-trip (booked through the dive operator, flying on Tues, Thurs, Fri, and Sun). Layang Layang closes during the monsoon season (early Sept to Feb).

If you want to stay close to Kota Kinabalu, Borneo Divers (see above) makes day trips to **Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park.** This group of five islands about 8km (13 miles) off the coast of Kota Kinabalu has been protected since the mid-'70s. Throughout the park, waters are clear and visibility is good. Although these islands are not as lauded as Sipadan and Layang Layang, if you're looking for some quick diving excitement but have time and money constraints, it's highly recommended. A day trip that includes two boat dives and a shore dive costs RM265 ($77/£48), not including equipment rentals. Borneo Divers has a base camp on the smallest island, from which they also conduct complete PADI scuba courses.

Sabah has many other dive sites, including sites such as Pulau Tiga, of *Survivor* TV fame. A couple of sites also offer wreck diving, so if you're interested, inquire when you make your booking.

For other types of watersports, your best bet is to either book these activities through your resort or plan a DIY trip to Tunku Abdul Rahman Park. Catch a ferry at the newly upgraded Kota Kinabalu City Terminal, near the Sabah Ports Authority/Marine Police Jetty to take you to the park. It costs RM30 ($8.70/£5.40) and is only 8km (13 miles) from Kota Kinabalu, so you can spend a day trip at one or more of the park's five islands sunning on the beach. **Snorkel** rentals go for around RM10 ($2.90/£1.80), and parasailing charges run RM100 ($29/£18). The latest thrill is **sea walking**—donning an enormous helmet connected to the surface with a tube, which allows you to breathe

underwater without tanks. This costs RM150 ($44/£27) per person (✆ **088/249-115;** www.borneoseawalking.com). ***Tip for snorkelers:*** Bring cotton socks to wear under your rental fins to prevent blisters. There are cafes and toilets near the jetties, plus good accommodations on two of the islands.

Sabah's rugged terrain makes for terrific hiking, camping, biking, and rafting, for any level, from soft adventure to extreme sports. **TYK Adventure** (Borneo Travel; Lot 48–2F, second floor, Beverly Hill Plaza; ✆ **088/727-825;** www.tykadventuretours.com) was founded by a local Chinese award-winning tour guide Tham Yau Kong, who also happens to hold records for the longest cultural walk (1998) and for leading the first group to cycle around Mt. Kinabalu (1999). Mountain-biking trips around Papar or Penampang can be arranged for RM310 ($90/£56) per person for the day trip; the rate includes hotel transfer, mountain bike, and helmet.

Many come to Sabah to climb **Mt. Kinabalu.** It's an exhilarating trip if you are prepared and if you hit it just right, in terms of weather and timing. It can only be done on an overnight trip, which includes a 4- or 5-hour hike from the park headquarters uphill to a ranger station, where you stay the night. Groups awake at 3am to begin the 3-hour hike to the summit. This is not light trekking, as some parts are steep, altitude sickness can cause headaches and nausea, and because you're trying to summit in time for sunrise, you're trekking in pitch darkness. Come prepared with cold weather snugglies, or at the very least a wool sweater or fleece, long pants, windbreaker, rain poncho, and hiking boots. Bring a good, strong flashlight and pack plenty of trail mix and sports drinks for rejuvenation. And finally, there's no guarantee that the weather will cooperate with your itinerary. You might hit rain or find the summit covered in clouds. There's pretty much nothing any tour operator can do to guarantee you'll get a clear view. **TYK Adventure** can also book this tour for you; a 2-day/1-night trip costs RM900 ($261/£162). Make sure you book early because they need to make sure there's space available at park accommodations. The price includes transfer, lodging, and your guide to the summit.

TYK also plans regular trips out to Sandakan, on the eastern coast of Sabah, for trips to see the **Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Center,** the largest orangutan sanctuary in the world with facilities to house and train hundreds of orphaned orangutans for eventual release back into the wild, with a boat trip to see the **Marine Turtle Conservation Park and Hatchery.**

Monsopiad Cultural Village, a Kadazandusun heritage center with its creepy House of Skulls, is located in Penampang, not far from Kota Kinabalu. During the 3-hour visit to the village you'll tour the place and be treated to a cultural performance. It's about the height of "touristy" Sabah, but can be a fun half-day trip if you want to see bit of local culture. Call them at ✆ **088/774-337** to book; RM100 ($29/£18) includes transportation to and from your hotel, the tour, and a welcome drink. The tour leaves daily from 9:30am and again at 2:30pm.

In 2000, the **North Borneo Railway** (Tanjung Aru Railway; ✆ **088/263-933**) revived the tradition of steam train travel with the launch of a 1954 fully renovated British Vulcan steam locomotive pulling six restored carriages. Traversing a 58km (36-mile) route from Tanjung Aru, near Kota Kinabalu, to the town of Papar, the train passes water and mangrove views, past fishermen and local sea crafts, through a mountain tunnel, and out the other side into a vast scenery of paddy fields. Carriages are open-air but comfortable, with soft seats and wood and brass accents. A swanky bar car and observation deck round out facilities that also include toilets. The train departs every Wednesday and

Saturday at 10am, returning at 2pm; tickets are RM195 ($57/£35). At the time of writing, the railway was under maintenance, but do check to see if they're up and running during your visit; it's well worth it.

For another view of the countryside, **Touchdown Holidays Malaysia** (✆ **088/249-276;** www.touchdowncollection.com) offers thrilling **helicopter tours,** flying over Kota Kinabalu, tropical wilds, and the jewel-colored sea. They also operate luxury boats around the islands off Kota Kinabalu.

10

Bali (Indonesia)

by Jen Lin-Liu

Though Bali is known to the world as an island resort destination, one could argue that its beaches are the least spectacular of its draws. If you're looking for pristine, quiet beaches, go elsewhere, but if you're looking for a balanced combination of culture, nightlife, good waves, beautiful rice paddies, mountain scenery, fantastic year-round weather, pampering spa treatments, and the world's best-rated resorts at reasonable prices, Bali is the place to go.

A Hindu haven in the Muslim-majority Indonesian archipelago, Bali has for decades attracted artists, honeymooners, spiritual seekers, surfers, and those otherwise looking for the "good life." The Balinese have always been accommodating hosts, and their acceptance of different lifestyles has drawn an assortment of "misfit" residents. During your trip to Bali, you're destined to meet some characters, whether they be of the "Kuta cowboy" variety—young Indonesian bachelors trolling the beach for foreign girlfriends—or the cult of New Age, yoga-obsessed foreigners who have settled in the rice paddies of Ubud.

The Balinese practice a unique amalgam of Indian Hindu traditions, Buddhism, ancient Javanese practices, and indigenous animistic beliefs. The beauty of their faiths colors every aspect of life, from fresh flowers strewn everywhere in obeisance to the calm of morning prayer at temple. During your visit, you're sure to catch the distinctive tones of the gamelan, a xylophone-like instrument, and the gathering of sarong-clad worshipers at the island's ubiquitous temples.

Bali's ever-increasing tourism numbers have been recently dealt a blow because of new terrorism fears. In November 2008, Indonesia executed several of the Bali bombers who set off explosives in downtown Kuta in 2002, killing 202 people. Fears of reprisal attacks caused Australia and America to reissue travel warnings.

The world's economic downturn has also contributed to a plunge in tourist numbers. Many of Bali's resorts are reporting that 2009 occupancy levels are down a quarter or more from a year ago. As a result, more of the visitors coming to Bali these days are from nearby countries such as Australia, and a nascent group of travelers are emerging from Russia and China. But if you are able to afford a vacation to Bali, now is the time to take advantage of cut-rate deals that many hotels are offering in light of these challenges.

You'll likely hear complaints from longtime residents that much of Bali's charm has been lost with its growing number of strip malls, Western outposts of Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts, and its sometimes rowdy nightlife. But get out of south Bali, the center of the island's development, and you'll be rewarded in every direction with quiet villages, pristine scenery, and plenty of time to restore your "inner balance."

1 GETTING TO KNOW BALI

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Tiny Bali has great topographical variety. Located in the center of Indonesia's vast archipelago, the island has an area of 5,620 sq. km (roughly 2,192 sq. miles), only the size of a large metropolis. The land is divided in half, east to west, by a volcanic mountain chain and is scored lengthwise by deep river gorges. White-sand beaches line the coast to the east, as well as near Kuta in the most populated area of wider lowlands to the south. Dotting the island are active volcanoes, including Gunung Agung, a dynamic peak and a power point of Balinese culture and belief. Central Ubud is one of the more beautiful spots, with mountainous scenery, lush vegetation, and Bali's famed terraced rice farms. The far west is the least developed area of the island, with mountainous terrain mostly given over to national park land.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

As distinct as Balinese life is, its people and culture originated elsewhere. Evidence of settlement goes back to the Neolithic period of around 3000 b.c., but the culture flourished under Chinese and Indian influences, including the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism beginning in 800 b.c. Bali was ruled periodically by the Javanese. With the rise of Islam on the mainland, the last Javanese Majapahit king fled Jakarta for Bali in 1515, cementing the island's Javanese influence and affecting a renaissance in art and culture that would survive years of Muslim incursion.

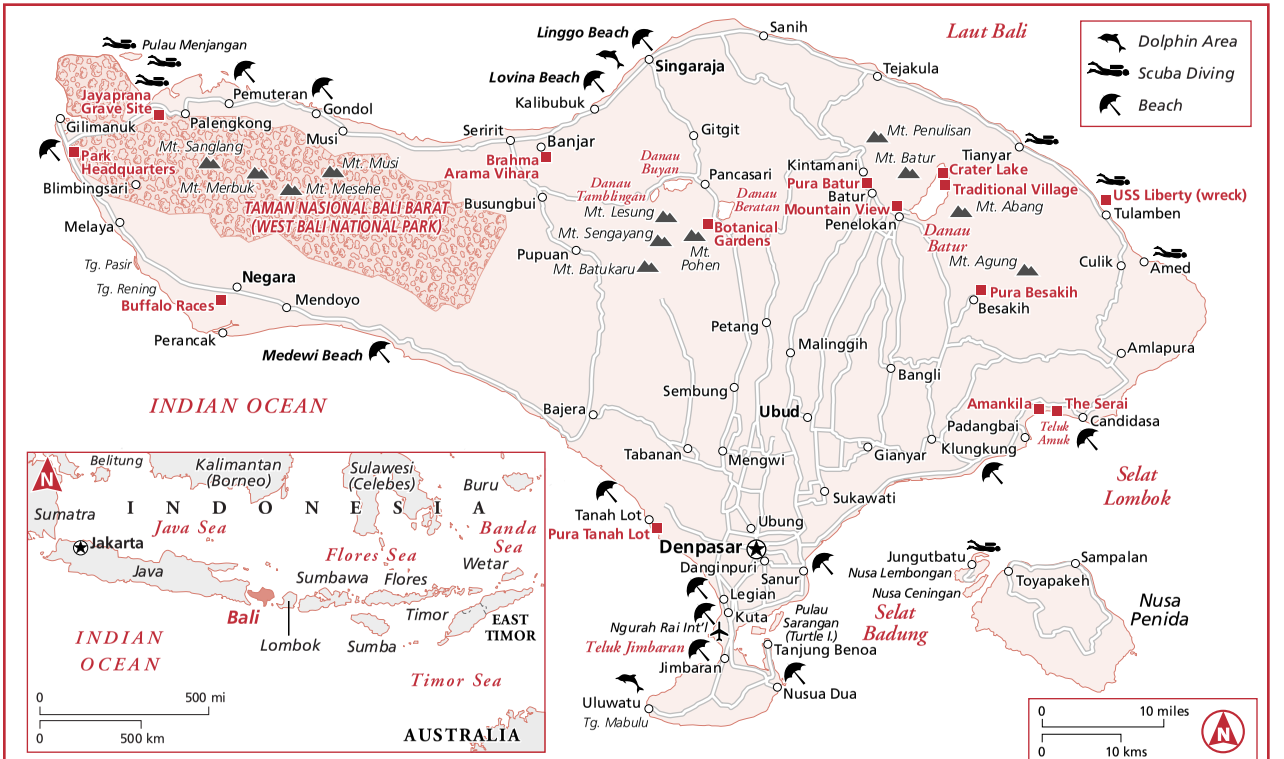
The first real Western presence was established in 1601, when a Dutch contingent came to set up formal relations and establish trade. Attempts to expand relations were largely rebuffed—even as the **Dutch East India Company** expanded throughout the area—but Balinese slaves were shipped to Dutch and French merchants nonetheless. In the era of Napoleon, Holland's East Indian holdings passed first to the French and then to the British, who returned them to the Dutch in the peace agreement following Napoleon's Waterloo defeat in 1815. After protracted struggle, the Dutch fully secured control in 1909.

A steady stream of European settlers and visitors followed—doctors and teachers at first, then the first tourists, artists, and cultural explorers. By the 1930s, Bali's reputation as a magical paradise was spreading rapidly, and such figures as anthropologist Margaret Mead and artist Walter Spies frequented the island.

World War II saw an exodus of foreigners with the arrival of Japanese troops. For Indonesians, it was a time of both strain under the brief Japanese occupation and revelation in light of the withdrawal of Dutch control. Shortly after the end of the war in 1945, Nationalist Party founder **Sukarno,** a thorn in the side of the Dutch since the 1920s, announced a declaration of Indonesian independence and was named president. The Dutch withdrew under international pressure in 1949, allowing the creation of the Republic of Indonesia, a tentative federation.

Hindu Bali was suspect under the rule of Muslim Jakarta, and the island was hit very hard by economic collapse. In 1965, **Suharto** seized control in response to a staged communist coup, and bloody conflicts continued for several years. As many as 100,000 Balinese were killed as suspected communists or as ethnic Chinese.

Under Suharto, the military gained a far-reaching influence over national affairs. For the next 3 decades, until the major economic crisis of 1997, Indonesia enjoyed a period


Laut Bali
Dolphin Area
Scuba Diving
Beach
Pulau Menjangan
Jayaprana Grave Site
Pemuteran
Gondol
Gilimanuk
Palengkong
Musi
Park Headquarters
Mt. Sanglang
Mt. Musi
Blimbingsari
Mt. Merbuk
Mt. Mesehe
TAMAN NASIONAL BALI BARAT (WEST BALI NATIONAL PARK)
Melaya
Tg. Pasir
Tg. Rening
Negara
Buffalo Races
Mendoyo
Perancak
Medewi Beach
INDIAN OCEAN
Linggo Beach
Lovina Beach
Singaraja
Sanih
Tejakula
Kalibubuk
Seririt
Banjar
Brahma Arama Vihara
Busungbui
Gitgit
Danau Buyan
Danau Tamblingan
Mt. Lesung
Mt. Sengayang
Pupuan
Mt. Batukaru
Pancasari
Danau Beratan
Botanical Gardens
Mt. Pohen
Kintamani
Pura Batur
Batur
Mountain View
Penelokan
Mt. Penulisan
Mt. Batur
Tianyar
Crater Lake
Traditional Village
Mt. Abang
Danau Batur
Mt. Agung
USS Liberty (wreck)
Tulamben
Culik
Amed
Pura Besakih
Besakih
Petang
Malinggih
Bangli
Amlapura
Sembung
Bajera
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Toyapakeh
Nusa Penida
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Selat Badung
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Sulawesi (Celebes)
Buru
Sumatra
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INDIAN OCEAN
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AUSTRALIA

of prosperity in spite of Suharto's embezzling autocracy. During this time, and with government attention, Bali rose to prominence as a top tourist destination in the region.

In just the last half-century, Bali has undergone remarkable change and weathered turmoil on the Indonesian mainland. The riots and protests that erupted in Indonesia in 1998 were the result of 3 decades of military rule and struggles to bring the world's fourth most-populous country into the modern global economy. Chafing under the yoke of Suharto, the Indonesians finally revolted, and demonstrations turned into riots that made headlines around the world. In June 1999, Indonesians witnessed their first free parliamentary election since 1955, ousting Suharto. But riots, bombings, and separatist protests continued to plague the country, specifically in Aceh and Irian Jaya. On May 20, 2002, East Timor was internationally recognized as an independent state after a protracted struggle. Indonesia achieved a tentative peace under a provisional government headed by **President Megawati,** the daughter of Sukarno (predecessor to Suharto). Megawati inherited political instability and an economic crisis, but addressed corruption and the military's human rights record.

The former military general **Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono**—known as "SBY"—defeated Megawati in 2004 and is up for reelection in 2009. He has ruled under a period of relative peace and stability, and, with the help of Australian and American forces, many alleged terror cells have been broken under his watch. But recent efforts by politicians to impose Sharia law and antipornographic measures seem to indicate that support for a Islamic state is still strong.

BALI TODAY

Tourism had been rebounding significantly since the October 2002 bombings when terrorists struck again in October 2005. The second attack was smaller, killing 20, but the use of suicide bombers in two highly touristed areas (Kuta and Jimbaran Bay) made it just as frightening. Even so, tourists, recognizing that terrorism is a problem around the world, have once again begun returning to Bali. Huge foreign investments in new luxury resorts—such as the Karma Kandara, where palatial villas can go for as much as $7,000 (£4,667) per night—indicate that many see a hopeful future for Balinese tourism. An increase in guards, bomb-sniffing dogs, and regular vehicle checks nearly everywhere in Bali also shows that the tourism industry and the government are taking security seriously. Ironically, the areas hardest hit by the drop in tourists are the more far-flung, remote parts of Bali where terrorists are least likely to strike. Rather than skipping out on one of the world's best beach holidays, travelers can alleviate their terrorism concerns by visiting Bali's more remote destinations, asking their hotels what security measures are in place, and staying alert when visiting crowded areas.

As with any undiscovered paradise that isn't so undiscovered anymore, Bali buffs mourn the loss of the island's innocence. You're sure to meet one or two scruffy old expats who'll be more than happy to tell you about "how it once was." Where there were no hotels or even electricity only a few decades ago, the island is now spotted with cyber cafes, upscale lodging, and pesky touts. Don't be dissuaded. The "real Bali" is wherever you look for it.

BALI'S PEOPLE & CULTURE

RELIGION More than 90% of the population is Hindu, with the minority made up of Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians. Religious ritual plays into every facet of life. Balinese Hindus believe in the pantheon of Hindu gods, as well as dharma and adharma,

order and disorder, and the need for balance between the two. The importance of karma, or the consequence of individual actions, plays into the peaceful daily rhythms, and forms of "making merit" are as many as the people who practice them. Whether placing daily offerings of flowers on someone's car or under taking rigorous mountain pilgrimages, Balinese believe that to achieve harmony the forces of good must be saluted with offerings, while the forces of evil must be appeased. With an estimated 20,000 temples and shrines, Bali is known as the "Island of the Gods," and every village has at least one temple with buildings dedicated to Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva (the Creator, the Preserver, and the Destroyer).

CELEBRATIONS **Tooth filing** is a rite of maturation, wherein the sharp front teeth, especially the canines, are filed down smooth (the idea being to differentiate humans from the animals). This can happen at any age, even after death, but is most often done to adolescents.

Weddings in Bali are unique, colorful affairs not to be missed, and **cremations** are surprisingly festive as well. Burning the body is the only way a soul can be freed of its earthly self and travel to its next incarnation (or to enlightenment), and death is a joyous occasion in Bali, full of floats and fanfare. Complicated towers (the higher the caste, the higher the tower) hold the body, carried aloft by cheering men who turn the tower in circles to send the spirit to heaven as they carry it to the burning ground. It's an extraordinary and wonderful event; there are even tours that will take you, or you can ask at any *losmen* (hostel) or at your hotel front desk. Cremations in Ubud are particularly noteworthy.

Compared to Western churchgoing, celebrations in Bali are very casual: Women gossip, children play, and dogs wander temple grounds freely, snacking on offerings. A priest chants, people pray and then get up, and others take their places. Ask before taking photos, and stay on your best behavior. Balinese are generally most welcoming and might even invite you for food or drinks.

MUSIC & DANCE The tones of the **gamelan**—the bright-sounding metal percussion ensembles that accompany just about every celebration and ceremony here—will turn your head. Music is everywhere in Bali, from the raucous *dangdut,* or Indonesian pop, pouring from restaurants and shops, to folk music and the refined classical music that accompanies the many staged dance performances and temple worship.

If you have a chance, don't miss a performance of traditional dance. **Legong** and **Barong dances** are intricate ballets depicting scenes from the epic *Ramayana.* **Kecak dance** is a circle of up to 100 men chanting rhythmically and telling the saga of a monkey king and his warriors. It's a colorful, fun experience. Many hotels hold shows; the Royal Palace in Ubud is a good choice. If you're lucky, you'll find a real, nontourist performance in an outlying village.

Wayang Kulit, or **shadow-puppet plays,** feature intricately cut leather figures that puppeteers use to project images against a screen. *Wayang Kulit* shows also depict tales from the Hindu epics and are accompanied by a gamelan ensemble and the voices of puppeteers (often injecting news, gossip, and bawdy jokes).

ARTS & CRAFTS Decoration and craft are as seamlessly woven into the fabric of life in Bali as are dance, music, and ritual. Fine carving and craftwork can be found adorning the most humble dwelling. Craftsmen are highly revered, and skilled wood and stone carvers turn out authentic works in street-side studios all over the island (concentrated in Ubud). Visitors are sure to walk away with some beautiful, original finds in wood and stone.

Masks used in traditional performance, many of the bug-eyed demoness Rangda, make fine souvenirs. (***Beware:*** Tradition has it that even tourist copies can be inhabited by spirits.) There's a lot of mass-produced clutter, and lots of these works have been "aged" by an artful banging around on the side walk; authentic antiques are rare, so be cynical of claims of authenticity—though the copies can be quite good.

Ancient stylized **paintings of deities** and the delicately carved "lontar" **palm-frond books** are both still produced on the island. Expatriates have had as much influence on modern Balinese art as the ancients. As guiding patrons, men such as **Rudolf Bonnet,** a Dutchman, and **Walter Spies,** whose home on the site of the Tjampuhan Hotel in Ubud became central to the arts in Ubud, influenced local painters, opened societies, and brought the glory of Bali to the world at large. With a little searching, you can find some real masterpieces.

ETIQUETTE

Since the Balinese have been hosting foreign tourists for decades, they are fairly laid-back and accepting of Western habits—but even the Balinese have their traditions that should be respected. The most important rule is to cover up your legs and shoulders when entering a temple; most hotels supply sarongs for temple visits. The Balinese also ban menstruating women from temples. When speaking with locals, avoid pointing with your index finger. If you must point, stick out your thumb and make a fist with the rest of your fingers. As in India, pick up things with your right hand, not your left, which is perceived as being unclean.

LANGUAGE

The Balinese speak both Indonesian and Balinese—the former when out in public, the latter at home. Aside from the tendency toward seemingly jaw-breaking polysyllabic phrases, Indonesian is not that hard to learn; pronunciation is pretty straightforward, and spelling is phonetic. Balinese is much more complicated, not least because there are three levels—high, middle, and low—depending on the class and authority of the person to whom you are speaking.

English is spoken widely, and if you've learned a few words of Malay, you can give them a try here as the languages are quite similar.

2 THE BEST OF BALI IN 2 WEEKS

A visit to Bali is, as always, replete with kingly comforts, beautiful resorts, fine dining, and immersion in an ancient culture amid an island dreamscape. The following 2-week plan starts you off in Seminyak and then takes you to Ubud, Gunung Bakur, Menjangan, Jimbaran Bay, and Tanjung Banoa. The last stop is Nusa Dua, where you can treat yourself to a luxury spa.

Days ❶–❷: Seminyak ★

This hip, yuppie beachside enclave is a great alternative to the overrun Kuta just south of here. Lounge at the oceanfront pool at the luxurious **Legian,** followed by a sunset visit to the temple Tanah Lot. The next day, take a surf lesson at the **Rip Curl School of Surf,** followed by a sunset cocktail and dinner at **Ku De Ta.** Dance late into the night at **Hu'u Bar.**

Days ❸–❹: Ubud ★★

The 1-hour drive to Ubud takes you from the shore to the lush rice paddies and jungles of Bali. The stellar **COMO Shambhala** (a wellness resort and spa that dubs itself "The Estate") and the **Chedi Club** (a collection of boutique private villas with personal butlers) are worth every rupiah. Take a morning trek through the rice paddies and get a back scrub and rub at **Ubud Body Works Center** or the **Alila Ubud,** both great value spas. Tuck into a gourmet French meal at **Mosaic,** run by chef Chris Salans. The next day, peruse the numerous house wares shops on Monkey Forest Road and take a break at **Monkey Forest,** where you can feed the monkeys a few bananas. Late in the afternoon, take the 1-hour drive to Penelokan, a town that sits on the outer crater's edge of **Gunung Batur.** The digs aren't fancy here, but the best of the lot is the **Lakeview Hotel.**

Day ❺: Gunung Batur

Make the 2-hour ascent of Gunung Batur, an active volcano. At the top, you can boil eggs in pockets of erupting steam and walk along one of the volcano's ridges. In the afternoon, hire a car for the 2-hour trip to **Candi Dasa,** on Bali's east shore. The boutique **Alila Manggis** has good-value accommodations, beachside massage pavilions, and one of the area's best restaurants, Sea Salt.

Days ❻–❼: Temples & Diving in the East ★★

Take a day trip to **Besakih,** Bali's most important temple, and spend the afternoon wandering around the village of **Tenganan,** followed by dinner at **Vincent's** on Candi Dasa's sleepy commercial strip. The next day, go diving or snorkeling at the **Blue Lagoon.** If you're an advanced diver, sign up for the famed wreck dive at **Tulamben.**

Days ❽–❾: Total Relaxation in the North or on Lombok ★★

To truly get away from it all, head to either Bali's northern beaches by car or the neighboring island of Lombok via plane or boat. In the north, stay at the **Matahari Beach Resort,** which provides bungalows with traditional Balinese facades and a Michelin star–worthy restaurant. On Lombok, the most luxurious choice (and a good value) is the **Oberoi,** with a gorgeous swimming pool and a secluded beach.

Days ❿–⓫: Jimbaran Bay

Hire a car to the romantic yet local area of Jimbaran Bay, home to a number of the world's top resorts. The cream of the crop are the **Karma Kandara** and the **Four Seasons Resort at Jimbaran Bay.** Visit the cliff-side temple **Uluwatu** at sunset, followed by a grilled lobster and shrimp dinner at **Menega Cafe,** the best seafood hut on Jimbaran beach.

Days ⓬–⓮: Nusa Dua ★

End your holiday by winding down beachside or poolside at any number of the resorts in this five-star enclave. If you're seeking a peaceful and quiet alternative to the brand-name resorts, head to the pristine **Balé,** a series of minimalist villas with ocean views. The **St. Regis** offers fantastic restaurants and a top-notch spa. Visit **Bumbu Bali,** one of the island's top restaurants, which offers authentic Balinese cuisine and cooking classes.

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO BALI

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Bali Department of Tourism operates visitor information centers at a number of locations: at **Ngurah Rai International Airport** (✆ **361/751011,** ext. 5123); in **Ubud**

 at the crossroad of Monkey Forest Road and Jalan Raya Ubud; and in **Kuta** at Jalan Benesari 36B, Legian (✆ **361/754090** or 081/2392-8098). Or try the **Bali Tourism Board** (✆ **361/235600;** www.bali-tourism-board.com or balitourismboard.com).

Some good online sources include **Bali Paradise Online** (www.bali-paradise.com), **Bali & Indonesia on the Net** (www.indo.com), and **Bali Guide** (www.baliguide.com). **Bali Echo** (www.baliecho.com) is an informative arts and culture magazine.

There are lots of free pamphlets with listings, information, and maps: ***Hello Bali*** and ***Bali Plus*** have general info; ***The Beat*** (www.beatmag.com) is a free guide to nightlife, dining, and activities. ***The Yak*** and ***The Bud*** are a local glossies focusing on restaurants and nightlife in Seminyak and Ubud. For information about surfing, check www.indosurf.com.au, or pick up a copy of ***Indo Surf Guide,*** published by the same folks.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Visitors from the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and most of Europe can get visas on arrival through Ngurah Rai International Airport or the seaports of Padang Bai and Benoa. For stays of 7 days or less, the charge is $10 (£6.65); for stays of up to 30 days, the charge is $25 (£17). For stays of longer than 30 days, a tourist or business visa must be arranged *before* coming to Indonesia. A service called **Bali Concierge** (✆ **361/766880;** www.thebaliconcierge.com) can speed you through immigration and Customs once you land for a fee of $50 (£33) per person, plus visa charges.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

Customs allows you to bring in, duty-free, 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 100 grams of tobacco; cameras and film; 1 liter of alcohol; and perfume clearly intended for personal use. Forbidden are guns, weapons, narcotics, pornography (leave it at home if you're unsure how it's defined), televisions, fresh fruit, Chinese medicine, and printed matter with Chinese characters. Plants might also be confiscated. The export of tortoiseshell, crocodile skin, and ivory is prohibited.

MONEY

The currency of Indonesia is the **rupiah,** from the Sanskrit word for wrought silver, *rupya.* Coins come in denominations of Rp25, 50, 100, and 500. Notes are Rp100, 500, 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000, and 100,000; the largest denomination is worth about $8.90 (£5.90). The rate of exchange is relatively stable. At press time, it was about **Rp11,223 = $1.**

ATMS In Bali, ATMs are common in all major tourist areas and trade at good rates.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE Most major hotels will change currency, but offer less than favorable rates. Storefront exchange services line most streets and offer the best rates, but it's important to be careful of scams such as counterfeit bills and damaged currency that won't be accepted anywhere. Ask first about commission, and be sure to count your bills before walking away. State-sponsored **Wartel Telecommunications Service** offices are the best bet.

CREDIT CARDS Credit cards are accepted at Bali's higher-end restaurants and hotels. For transactions elsewhere, be prepared to use cash. To report a lost or stolen credit card, you can call **American Express** (counter at Danamon Bank, Jalan Legian 87) at ✆ **361/757510,** or **MasterCard** and **Visa** internationally at ✆ **(+1) 803/933-6294.**

WHEN TO GO

The high seasons are July and August and the weeks surrounding Christmas and New Year's, when prices are higher and tourist traffic is considerably increased. Try to avoid these times as well as February and March (given the heat and humidity).

CLIMATE Bali is just below the equator—so days are a consistent 12 hours long—and the temperatures always hover in the 80s Fahrenheit (upper 20s to low 30s Celsius). The rainy season lasts from October to April; rain usually comes in short, violent bursts that last an hour or so, and the humidity is at its crushing worst during this period. The hottest months are February, March, and April. Remember that it gets a bit nippy at night up in the mountains, but a light sweater will certainly be enough.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS & EVENTS Public holidays and events include **New Year's Day** (Jan 1), **Idul Fitri** (celebration of the end of Ramadan, in late Feb), **Nyepi** (a major purification ritual and a time when Balinese are supposed to sit at home, silent, in late Mar), **Good Friday** and **Easter Sunday** (late Mar/early Apr), **Muslim New Year** (mid-May), **Indonesia Independence Day** (Aug 17), **Ascension Day of Mohammed** (early Dec), and **Christmas** (Dec 25).

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH CONCERNS See chapter 3's "Health & Safety" section (p. 36) for information on health concerns, vaccinations, and general issues that affect the region. No inoculations are required for Bali, but it's always a good idea to get shots for hepatitis A, tetanus, polio, and typhoid (likely you've already had some of these). It's also a good idea to check the most recent information at the **Centers for Disease Control** (click "Travelers' Health" at **www.cdc.gov**).

The CDC has declared Bali malaria-free, though it is not uncommon on other islands in the Indonesian archipelago. Of concern, though, are the many stray dogs (and monkeys) on Bali and therefore rabies, so beware of strays.

You can't drink the water on Bali, but bottled water is cheap and readily available. Just about every hotel will supply you with a couple bottles or a jug of boiled water—to be extra cautious, use it to brush your teeth as well. Restaurants in tourist areas supply safe water and ice, but to be sure, ask for *air minum* (bottled drinking water) and no ice. Avoid "Bali belly" (the Indonesian version of Montezuma's Revenge) by sticking to foods that have been peeled or cooked.

SAFETY CONCERNS To alleviate any terrorism concerns you may have, consider visiting Bali's more remote destinations, asking hotels what security measures are in place, and staying alert when visiting crowded areas. It is recommended that you check with your home country's overseas travel bureau or with the **U.S. State Department** (click "Travel Warnings" at **www.travel.state.gov**) to keep abreast of travel advisories and current affairs that could affect your trip.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE **Ngurah Rai International Airport** (✆ **361/751011**) is 13km (8 miles) southwest of Denpasar. For airport information and connection to airline reservations counters, call ✆ **361/751011,** ext. 1454. When you leave Bali, there will be an airport departure tax of Rp150,000 ($13/£9.15).

Most visitors from the U.S. and Canada fly here via connection in Taipei on **China Airlines** or **EVA Air,** Bangkok on **Thai Airways,** Jakarta on **Garuda Indonesia,** Singapore

on **Singapore Airlines,** Tokyo on **Japan Airlines** and **Northwest Airlines,** Hong Kong on **Cathay Pacific,** or Seoul on **Korean Air.** Check with travel agents for deals and package rates, some with affordable overnight connections via Bangkok. Bali is served from Europe by **Cathay Pacific** via Hong Kong; tickets can be purchased from **British Airways, Singapore Airlines,** or **Air France.** Flights from Australia and New Zealand can be booked through **Qantas** and **Australian Airlines.**

Few travelers stop in the city, but connect directly with their resort area of choice. To get to your destination from the airport, it is a good idea to prearrange pickup through your hotel (the rate is comparable to the official rates at the airport); otherwise, you can buy a ticket at the official taxi counter just outside Customs and arrange a fixed-rate ride to your hotel. Avoid the temptation to go with unofficial cabs; you might get caught in a taxi scam that will leave you frustrated, overcharged, or in the wrong place.

GETTING AROUND

BY PRIVATE CAR Given how cheap and easy it is to hire someone to drive, many folks just avoid the headache of driving themselves. **Private taxis** are the most common choice of transport and can get you to any destination for a reasonable price. A driver and car should be around $35 (£23), plus gas charges, for an 8-hour day. A reputable agency is **Amertha Dana** (✆ **361/735406**), which can arrange transport in most of southern Bali. Otherwise, guys offering "transport" and pantomime-steering a car will be at your heels wherever you go and, depending on your luck, can be pretty helpful. Be specific about destination and price (and check for seat belts) before setting out.

Note that if you do drive yourself, you will need an international driver's license or a locally issued tourist driving license; 1-month licenses are issued on the spot for Rp150,000 ($13/£9.15) at the **Foreign License Service** (Jalan Gunung Sanghiang, Denpasar; ✆ **361/422323**). Traffic is on the left side, and "third-world rules" apply: The more aggressively honking, larger vehicle goes first. Traffic police are just bribe collectors.

BY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION Blue and brown vans called ***bemos*** operate as buses in Bali. They have regular routes, but these aren't really written down. Most tourists save the headache and go for private transport. *Bemos* are better for short hops (around town, for example) than long distances. **Metered taxis,** if you can find them, are your best bet. Be sure that the driver turns on his meter (you might have to insist more than once). One other option is to ask at your hotel or a travel agent about the **tourist shuttles** that connect the main destinations on the island.

BY MOTORBIKE Riding a motorbike on Bali is a dangerous proposition; on even the briefest visit to the island, you will see your share of crashes. Renting a scooter or motorbike, however, is a cheap (from $3/£2 per day) and fun way to see the island. Keep in

Tips A Note on Addresses

Street addresses in Bali can be as vague as "on the main street." In some areas, that's all that passes for an address. Don't worry—most are easy to find. Some addresses include an X to denote a new spot that has been wedged between two older addresses.

Tips Telephone Dialing at a Glance

- **To place a call from your home country to Bali:** Dial the international access code (011 in the U.S. and Canada, 0011 in Australia, 0170 in New Zealand, 00 in the U.K.), plus Indonesia's country code **(62),** the city or local area code (**361** for Kuta, Jimbaran, Nusa Dua, Sanur, and Ubud; **362** for Lovina; **363** for Candi Dasa; **370** for Lombok), and the six-digit phone number (for example, 011 62 362 000000). Mobile phone numbers do not have a city or local area code, and rather begin with an 8 followed by a long string of numbers. Dial Indonesia's country code (62) followed by the number.
- **To place a call within Indonesia:** You must use the area code if calling between states. For calls within the country, area codes are all preceded by a **0** (for example, 0361 for Ubud, 0362 for Lovina, 0363 for Candi Dasa, 0370 for Lombok, and so on). Dial the city or area code preceded by a **0,** and then the local number (for example, 0362 000000). For mobile phones, add a 0 to the number.
- **To place a direct international call from Indonesia:** Dial the international access code **(00),** plus the country code, the area or city code, and the number (for example, to call the U.S., you'd dial 00 1 000/000-0000).
- **To reach the ternational operator:** Dial 102.
- **International country codes are as follows:** Australia, 61; Cambodia, 855; Canada, 1; Hong Kong, 852; Laos, 856; Malaysia, 60; Myanmar, 95; New Zealand, 64; the Philippines, 63; Singapore, 65; Thailand, 66; U.K., 44; U.S., 1; Vietnam, 84.

mind that riding is safer and more beautiful in remote areas. The same driver's license requirements for cars apply to motorbikes and scooters.

BY BOAT Several companies offer diving and snorkeling day trips, sunset or dinner cruises, and connection to the nearby islands of Nusa Penida and Nusa Lembongan. Both **Bounty Cruises** (✆ **361/726666;** www.balibountycruises.com) and **Bali Hai Cruises** (✆ **361/720331;** www.balihaicruises.com) run regular high-end tours from Bali's Benoa Harbor. **Sail Sensations** (✆ **361/725864;** www.bali-sailsensations.com) offers day and overnight sails. The ***Wakalouka*** (✆ **361/723629**), a luxury catamaran, transports you in style to its exclusive property on Nusa Lembongan.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Bali accommodations range from bungalows that cost Rp40,000 ($3.55/£2.45) to luxury villas serviced by a retinue of servants and priced at more than $1,000 (£667). Another increasingly popular trend for families and groups of friends is to rent a villa for the duration of the trip; villas range from $1,000 to $4,000 (£667–£2,667) per week and often include a cook, cleaning staff, and a driver (p. 600). On the lower end, and for a more authentic experience, visitors can stay in *losmen* (traditional homestay, a bastardization of

the Dutch word *logement*) or rustic bungalows. Bali's resorts and fine Western hotels cost a fraction of what luxury accommodations would elsewhere, and many come to enjoy the upgrade.

Promotional and Internet rates are available at all hotels in Bali. Paying the rack rates, or published rates (which are listed in this guide), even in high season, is almost unheard of. Especially in the off season, it pays to shop around; you can show up at the front desk of even the largest hotels and ask for the best rate.

Almost all hotels charge a 21% government tax and service charge on top of the quoted rates. Some hotels tack on a charge in high season—the 2 or 3 weeks around Christmas and New Year's, plus the months of July and August.

TIPS ON DINING

The choices in Bali are many, but it's rare to find authentic Balinese or Indonesian food on a menu for foreigners; for that, you'll have to go to a *warung,* a local cafe, and many visitors are dissuaded by the typical *warung*'s appearance (some are pretty grungy). If you're not put off by a bit of grime, the food at *warungs* is authentic, delicious, and cheap. Most visitors, however, surrender to the call of high-quality international dining options, which are affordable and varied, with great options for vegetarians.

Indonesian dishes that you are most likely to encounter include *nasi goreng* (fried rice, usually topped with an egg), *mie goreng* (fried noodles), *nasi campur* (a plate of boiled rice with sides of meat and veggies; a house specialty), *ayam goreng* (fried chicken), *gado gado* (salad with peanut sauce, served hot or cold), and satay (small chunks of meat on skewers served with peanut sauce). *Padang* food (sold in little cafes called *rumah makan*) is spicy tidbits of fried fish, chicken, or veggies on a buffet; you pick what you want. A truly authentic Balinese dish found in roadside cafes is *babi guling,* delicious roast suckling pork prepared with spices over a spit. Just look for the ubiquitous signs with a picture of a pig. Visit www.baliguide.com/restaurants_guide.html for more information on Bali restaurants.

TIPS ON SHOPPING

The quantity of Balinese arts and crafts available on the island is overwhelming. Woodcarvers, jewelers, and craftspeople of all types line the streets around all tourist areas, particularly in and around Ubud and on the streets of Kuta. There's something for all budgets, from tourist trinkets to fine art and antiques. It's a shopper's paradise of fabrics, clothing, wood and stone carvings, paintings, and doodads of varying quality. Generally, you get what you pay for—but with a bit of haggling, you can get a lot more for what you pay. Shop around; the same item gets cheaper the more you look at it, and it's really the same stuff everywhere. Ask the price, offer half, smile, and go from there. Even at inflated prices, you'll still come out ahead of the game.

Fast Facts Bali

American Express The American Express office is at Banamon Bank at Jalan Legian 87 (✆ **361/757510**).

Business Hours Most places keep "daylight hours," which on the equator pretty much means 6am to 6pm (or a little later).

Drug Laws Though you might be offered marijuana at every turn, Indonesia officially takes drug offenses very seriously. American and Australian forces have teamed up with Indonesian police to fight drugs, along with terrorism, and penalties for mere possession include long jail sentences and large fines.

Electricity Currents can be either 110 volts (50 AC) or 220 to 240 volts (50 AC).

Embassies & Consulates **U.S.:** Jalan Hayam Wuruk 310, Denpasar (✆ **361/233605**). **Great Britain:** Tirtra Nadi 20, Sanur (✆ **361/270601**). **Australia:** Jalan Tantular 32, Renon, Denpasar (✆ **361/241118**). The Australian consulate also assists nationals of Canada and New Zealand.

Emergencies Bali has a new emergency response center that coordinates all governmental bureaus and services: Just dial ✆ **112.** Otherwise, you can call ✆ **110** for the police, ✆ **118** for an ambulance, ✆ **113** in case of fire, and ✆ **111/115/151** for search and rescue. The Red Cross can be reached at ✆ **26465.**

Hospitals If you need a doctor or dentist, ask your hotel for a referral—many have one on call. In Kuta, try the **Bali International Medical Centre,** Jalan Bypass Ngurah Rai 100X (✆ **361/761263**); it's open daily from 8am to midnight and sometimes will send someone to your hotel. Another option in Kuta is the **International SOS Bali,** Jalan Bypass Ngurah Rai (✆ **361/710505**). There is a city hospital in Denpasar, but for any serious ailment, you should evacuate to Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok.

Internet Access Internet cafes, some with wireless laptop access, are springing up all over Bali. Expect to pay about $1.50 (£1) per hour.

Language The Balinese speak both Indonesian and Balinese—the former when out in public, the latter at home. English is widely spoken throughout Bali, particularly in the major tourist areas. While not everyone is fluent, most of the people you will be dealing with will speak enough English that you can communicate with them. See "Language," p. 596, for more information.

Liquor Laws You won't find liquor in *halal* restaurants catering to Muslims, but there are no restrictions elsewhere. The legal drinking age is 17, but the police rarely enforce this law.

Mail Your hotel can send mail for you, or you can go to the post office in Denpasar, at Jalan Raya Puputan Renon (✆ **361/223566**). Other branches are in Kuta (Jalan Raya Kuta; ✆ **361/754012**), Ubud, and Sanur. For big items, there are packing and shipping services in all major tourist areas, but the cost can be exorbitant.

Police Dial ✆ **110** for the police.

Safety Bali is by and large a safe place, even after dark. Violent crime is rare. However, pickpockets are not, so you should exercise considerable caution by using a money belt, particularly in crowded tourist areas, and being careful not to flash large wads of cash. If you need assistance, contact the **Guardian Angels Tourist Police** (✆ **361/763753**), available 24 hours a day.

Many hotels offer safety deposit boxes, the best place to keep your extra cash and other valuables. If nothing else, make sure your suitcase has a good lock on it. Even the best hotel can't always guarantee security for valuables left lying in plain sight.

Telephones The international country code for Indonesia is **62.** Because many hotels charge a great deal even for using your calling card, you're better off using the Wartel network of privately owned pay phones. There's one in every tourist center, though some work better than others. Some also have Internet access. See "Telephone Dialing at a Glance," p. 601, for details.

Time Zone Bali is 8 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, except during daylight saving time, which it does not observe. That's 13 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time in the U.S.

Tipping Tipping is optional. Most restaurants include a service charge. Leave a small tip if you feel the need, and round up taxi bills to the nearest thousand.

Toilets Western-style toilets with seats are becoming more common than the Asian squat variety, though cheap *losmen* (homestays) and some less touristy public places still have the latter. Always carry toilet paper with you, or you might have to use your hand (the left one only, please) and the dip bucket.

Water Avoid tap water in Bali unless properly boiled. Bottled water is available everywhere, and restaurants in tourist areas seem to use it as a matter of course, but you should always ask to be sure.

4 KUTA

A quick 10 minutes from the airport and you'll be in Kuta, Bali's most developed area, a popular spot for budget travelers and a longtime favorite for weekend vacationers from nearby Australia. It's also where Abu Sayef chose to attack the island on the night of October 12, 2002, and, though it is again brimming with tourists, memories of that day are still fresh. A new memorial across from the site of the bombing was recently built at the corner of Jalan Legian and Poppies Lane II. Next to a small fountain is a wall with the names of the bombing victims by nationality.

Kuta is made up of narrow streets and alleys, and pedestrians share space with honking, mufflerless cars and motorbikes. You'll be harried by some of the most aggressive touts on the island, and the beaches are crowded with imploring sellers and masseurs; the tourist rush, however, means some of the best nightlife and dining on the island. Unfortunately, the current makes swimming difficult and dangerous.

The best compromise of all, short of staying elsewhere on the island, is to hit the quiet beaches just north of Kuta at **Legian** and **Seminyak** ★.

GETTING THERE

Kuta is near the airport, and most hotels offer free airport pickup. If you're hiring a cab, it's best to go to the airport's official taxi counter, where you'll pay a set fare.

GETTING AROUND

Kuta is a big rectangle. The two main north-south streets are ocean-side Jalan Pantai Kuta and Jalan Legian. They're connected east-west by Jalan Benesari, Poppies Gang I, and many quaint alleys. You can easily walk all of this area or take the reasonably priced blue-and-yellow metered taxis.

Fast Facts Kuta

Currency Exchange There are a number of ATMs in Kuta. **Wartel** outlets are found all around the main streets.

Internet Access Internet cafes almost outnumber transport guides in Kuta. They charge between Rp10,000 and Rp37,000 (90¢–$3.30/60p–£2.25) per hour for a reliable connection. For those with a laptop and a wireless card, **ESC Urban Food Station** (JL Legian; ✆ **361/756362**) offers free wireless Internet access 24 hours a day. Many hotel lobbies, such as at the Legian, also have wireless access for a fee.

Mail There is a main post office on Jalan Raya Tuban, but it's far from the town center. There are also some postal agents around town, or your hotel can send mail for you.

Telephones The area code in Kuta is **361.**

WHERE TO STAY

Kuta Beach, while still a booming resort, is quite noisy and busy. We've listed the better choices in town and at nearby Legian and Seminyak to the north.

Kuta & Legian Beach

Expensive

Padma Hotel ★ You've got all that you need at the Padma, a self-contained, comfortable compound that's just the right distance from the fray at Kuta for peace and quiet, but close enough to go play and shop. There's something for the whole family here, including a good kids' club, daily activities, a roster of day trips, the fine Mandara Spa, and cultural classes such as egg painting and musical demonstrations. Garden rooms have parquet floors and Balinese furnishings. Standard rooms, in a four-story high-rise, all have balconies and great views. Family rooms open onto a patio and central garden. There is a quiet, tout-free grassy spot between the pool and the beach where the kids can frolic. The beach is not good for swimming, however.

Jalan Padma no. 1, Legian, Bali. ✆ **361/752111.** Fax 361/752140. www.hotelpadma.com. 405 units. $260–$285 (£173–£190) double; $355 (£237) chalet; $325–$1,850 (£217–£1,233) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 4 bars; outdoor pool; tennis court; game area w/Internet and PlayStation; tour desk; car rental; business center; 24-hr. room service; babysitting; laundry service; club-level rooms; meeting rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Moderate

Bounty Hotel ★★ The Bounty is popular with Australian revelers, especially at school-break times. The rooms are decidedly Western, but have traditional wood floors and are decorated with Balinese fabric. The standard rooms are slightly smaller than the deluxe, with the sink in the room. The complex, arranged around an attractive pool, features stone carvings and red-tile ornamentation. The hotel is within easy walking distance of the beach, the best shopping on Legian, and Kuta's many nightspots; the same people own the happening late-night **Bounty Bar & Restaurant.** This is a good choice if you want to be right in the middle of the fray.

Poppies Gang II, Jalan Segara Batu Bolong no. 18, Kuta, Bali. ✆ **361/753030.** Fax 361/752121. www.bountyhotel.com. 166 units. $106–$153 (£71–£102) double; $188 (£125) duplex; $203 (£135) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 2 outdoor pools; car rental; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, cable TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Hard Rock Hotel ★★ You'll be disarmed by this hotel's fun, fanciful design. The lobby is typical Hard Rock Cafe, lined with once-used guitars and gold records, and the decor throughout is bright, with corridors done in varying rock themes. Rooms are light and airy, with photos of artists, and bathrooms are done in playful geometric patterns. You'll also enjoy the outdoor living room, the in-house radio station, and a recording studio where you can live out your own musician fantasies. Sure, rock blares around the clock in the lobby, which has a popular bar, and in other public areas, but the fabulous kids' playroom—"Little Rock"—and the pool make it a great option for boomer families. It's not really Bali, but it is good fun.

Jalan Pantai, Banjar Pande Mas, Kuta, Bali. ✆ **361/761869.** Fax 361/761868. www.hardrockhotels.net. 418 units. $110–$155 (£73–£103) double; $195–$255 (£130–£170) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 3 bars; out door pool (w/swim-up bar); health club; rock-climbing wall; spa; kids' club; concierge; business center; shopping; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; meeting rooms; Wi-Fi; rock library. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/on-demand movies, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Poppies Cottages ★★ This is by far the best midrange hotel in Kuta, with atmospheric thatched cottages set among gorgeous gardens abloom with a riot of bougainvillea. Located at the town center, the property has a small central pool designed to look like a natural pond, surrounded by lush garden nooks perfect for lounging. The rooms are a bit compact for the price, but the open-air bathrooms are done in marble, complete with sunken tubs, and everything is very clean and cozy.

Poppies Lane I, Kuta, Bali. ✆ **361/751059.** Fax 361/752364. www.poppiesbali.com. 20 units. $85 (£57) double (seasonal rates available). AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; business center w/Internet access; shopping; room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

There are lots of budget options in busy Kuta. Small guesthouses crowd the back streets near the beach. You can try **Komala Indah I,** Poppies Lane I, 20 (✆ **361/751422**); or **Mimpi Bungalows,** Gang Sorga (✆ **361/751848**).

Seminyak

Very Expensive

Legian ★★★ At 93 sq. m (1,000 sq. ft.) and impeccably decorated by well-known interior designer Jaya Ibrahim, this hotel has an open and airy layout. The rooms, some of the best in Bali, feature fantastic lighting, two iPods loaded with music (which you're free to take to the beach or pool), a Bose stereo system, and a cordless phone, which give it the feel of a luxe home rather than a hotel room. Balconies, some directly facing the ocean, offer a great place to chill out, as does the simple rectangular pool that abuts the beach. Across the street at the **Club,** you sacrifice the ocean views but get the privacy of your own contemporary villa. The **Beach House,** a two-story home with panoramic ocean views, is big enough to host 60-person events. Service is very professional and the location is rivaled only by the Oberoi (see below).

Jalan Laksmana, Seminyak, Kuta, Bali. ✆ **361/730622.** Fax 361/730623. www.ghmhotels.com. 79 units. $450–$1,900 (£300–£1,267) suite; $2,300–$2,900 (£1,533–£1,933) beach house. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; 2-tiered pool; spa; watersports facilities; tour desk; shuttle service; shopping;

massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; meeting rooms. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, iPods and speakers, Bose stereo system, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe.

Oberoi ★★ The first hotel in Seminyak and one of the earliest luxury hotels on Bali, the Oberoi has long attracted celebrities, from Henry Kissinger to Julia Roberts. The property is composed of individual *lanais*—native bungalows of coral stone with wood beams and thatch roofs. Rooms are cozy and strike a great balance between high-end comforts and local style. Amenities are first class: raised futon beds, marble bathrooms with sunken tubs facing private gardens, and goodies such as slippers, robes, and flip-flops for the beach. Private pool villas are luxurious beyond belief. The beach here is great, with a nice expanse of sand and few touts to harass you. An outdoor amphitheater hosts traditional dance performances. Service is genuinely warm and helpful without fawning, and you can feel at ease here without forgetting that you're in Bali. The fine spa is managed by Banyan Tree.

Jalan Laksmana, Seminyak, Kuta, Bali. ✆ **361/730361.** Fax 361/730791. www.oberoihotels.com. 74 units. $320–$365 (£213–£243) *lanai;* $470–$970 (£313–£647) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; tennis court; fitness center; spa; sauna; tour desk; car rental; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, DVD, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Expensive

Anantara ★ These oversize suites overlooking Seminyak's beach are pretty much the closest you can sleep to the ocean without having to camp on the beach. This luxurious four-story hotel (one of the tallest buildings around), owned by a Thai developer and opened in the spring of 2008, resembles something plunked down from Miami's South Beach with a hip, urban vibe rather than a traditional Balinese resort. Decadent touches such as an outdoor bathtub on the balcony of each of the rooms (in addition to an extravagantly roomy tub in the bathroom), an espresso machine, and an iPod with Bose speakers make this a hit among a young, wealthy, globe-trotting crowd. The rooftop bar, S.O.S. (Sunset on Six), and the swimming pool on the ground level are perfect spots for lounging and watching sunsets. Wild Orchid, the hotel's main restaurant, serves authentic Thai food and interesting creations such as wok-fried lobster with water chestnuts in peanut sauce. Guests will find themselves right in the center of all of Seminyak's action.

Jalan Dhyana Pura, Seminyak, Bali. ✆ **361/737773.** Fax 361/737772. www.anatara.com. 59 units. $365–$440 (£243–£293) garden suite; $415–$600 (£277–£400) ocean suite; $2,900 (£1,933) penthouse. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; rooftop bar; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa; sauna; tour desk; car rental; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, satellite flatscreen TV w/in-house movies, DVD, iPod dock, Bose speakers, free Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, espresso machine, hair dryer, IDD phone, safe.

Hotel Tugu ★ The darkened, high-ceilinged lobby decorated with long, flowing curtains and a huge Hindu sculpture immediately sets the tone for this resort, which offers plenty of peace and quiet, in addition to a romantic ambience and a perfect surfer's beach. Rooms are decorated with an eclectic mix of Art Deco and Balinese antique furniture, Chinese porcelain vases, and four-poster beds. Two large villas, the Walter Spies Pavillion and the Puri Le Mayeur, have private plunge pools and outdoor bathrooms. Woerung Tugu, a rustic dining room decorated with picnic-style tables and chairs and Hindu stone sculptures, serves authentic Balinese cuisine. Located in between the bustling Seminyak area and the Tanah Lot temple, this resort strikes the right balance for those who want accessible restaurants and nightlife without having to be in the fray.

Jalan Pantai Batu Bolong, Canggu, Bali. ✆ **361/731701.** Fax 361/731708. www.tuguhotels.com. 21 units. $265–$475 (£177–£317) suite; $475 (£317) Walter Spies Pavillion; $600 (£400) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar ; outdoor pool; golf (nearb y); fitness c enter; t ennis c ourt, snooker ; bic ycle r ental; games; spa; sauna; t our desk ; 24-hr. r oom ser vice; c omplimentary af ternoon high t ea; c omplimentary airport transfer; helicopter landing pad; antiques gallery; complimentary welcome massage; meditation; yoga; P ilates; laundr y ser vice; dr y cleaning; librar y. *In r oom:* A/C, sat ellite TV w/in-house mo vies, DVD, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Vivalavi ★ Value Kids Just a fe w minutes' drive away fr om Seminyak is this F rench-owned villa hotel per fect for families or gr oups of friends seeking an alternativ e from the usual hotel and r esort scene. Each of the priv ate villas comes with its o wn priv ate yar d, daybed pavilion, and J acuzzi. The villas' two bedr ooms, each the same siz e and decorated with modern furnitur e, connect to their o wn bathr ooms decorated with gr eenery and a skylight. In between the bedrooms is a partially outdoor kitchen and living area that opens up to the yard. The common area includes a restaurant, a large swimming pool, and a game area with billiards and a small driving range, and the beach is a shor t drive away. Another draw is that the hotel is set in a typical B alinese neighborhood with *warungs,* away fr om anything remotely touristy.

Jalan Mertasari, Puri Prisklia 31x, Kerobokan, Bali. ✆ **361/8476028.** Fax 361/8476039. www.vivalavibali.com. 6 units. $208–$286 (£139–£191) 2-bedr oom villas. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar ; outdoor pool; fitness center; spa; sauna; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, IDD phone, safe.

Moderate

Desa Seni ★ Set up b y a Canadian pair , this ecor esort just nor th of S eminyak has a Wizard-of-Oz-meets-Balinese-countryside feel. Whimsical cottages with cur vy eav es and brightly color ed umbr ellas decorate the gr ounds, along with sev eral friendly dogs. The individually designed wood bungalo ws with r ustic touches ar e mor e luxurious at second glance, with amenities such as air-conditioning, rain--sho werheads, and DVD players and stereos hidden away in the cabinetr y. Yoga sessions are held twice daily in an open-air studio, while a saltwater lap pool is the per fect lounging spot. A good sur fing beach is just a short walk away, and you won't be more than a 15-minute driv e away from Seminyak.

Jalan Kayu Putih 13, P antai Berawa, C anggu, Bali. ✆ **361/8446392.** www.desaseni.com. 10 units . $150–$360 (£100–£240) 1- and 2-bedr oom bungalo ws. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar ; complimentary breakfast; pool bar ; out door pool; c omplimentary y oga; t our desk ; airpor t transf er; 24-hr. r oom ser vice; laundry service; movie rental; pool table; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD, stereo, fridge, IDD phone.

Puri Cendana Near the ocean at the end of busy D hyana Pura Street, the Puri Cendana offers a good balance of affordability, comfort, and location. The oversize rooms in two-story motel blocks try to fill the space with big canopy beds and sparse furnishings. The bathr ooms ar e stylish, with tubs looking onto priv ate gar dens, but the hallways could use some dusting. The pool is small and right near the r oad, as is the r estaurant, but you're just a shor t walk fr om the beach at S eminyak in one dir ection and all of the services and nightlife of D hyana Pura in the other.

Jalan Abimanyu (Dhyana Pura), Seminyak, Bali. ✆ **361/730869.** Fax 361/730868. http://geocities.com/puricendana. 24 units . $45–$80 (£30–£53) double (big disc ounts a vailable). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool bar ; outdoor pool; t our desk ; airport transfer; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; movie rental; pool table; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, IDD phone.

Villa Ixora Value Hidden away do wn a dir t r oad is this small cluster of villas and hotel rooms with a homey F rench countryside feel. The six hotel r ooms ar e decorated

Renting Your Own Villa

The real-estate boom in Bali has created a market of more than 1,000 privately owned villas, ranging from one-bedroom bungalows to palatial mansions with more than 10 bedrooms, which are available as vacation rentals. Prices range from around $150 (£100) per night for the smallest villas to several thousand dollars for the largest. It's an ideal arrangement for large families or groups of friends traveling together. Most villas come with at least several staff who attend to your every need, including cooking, cleaning, and driving, just as in a hotel. There are dozens of rental agencies on the island. Two reputable agencies are **Elite Havens** (✆ **0361/731-074;** www.elitehavens.com) and **Bali Villa Worldwide** (✆ **361/732-013;** www.balivillaworldwide.com).

with hardwood floors and Balinese furniture, and nearby is a large swimming pool next to a shaded patio, where breakfast is served. The two villas, featuring two- and three-bedroom accommodations, are rented to families and given their size and the large garden areas surrounding them, are also a good value. A small footpath leads to an uncrowded beach with good waves. Though it feels like it's in the middle of nowhere, set next to rice paddies and private homes, the property is just a short drive away from Seminyak.

Jalan Petitenget, Gang Cendrawasih, Kerobokan, Bali. ✆ **361/739390.** Fax 361/739394. www.ixorabali.com. 8 units. $75–$130 (£50–£87) double; $170–$210 (£113–£140) 2-bedroom villa; $190–$240 (£127–£160) 3-bedroom villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; airport transfer; business center; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; movie rental; pool table; library; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD, free Wi-Fi, kitchen, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

The international variety in Kuta is a result of homesick tourists; unfortunately, this translates into mediocre copies of Western fare. There are a couple of standouts, listed below.

Kuta

Kori Restaurant and Bar ★★ INTERNATIONAL/STEAKHOUSE Valet parking in the narrow and chaotic Poppies Gang II? Finery uncharacteristic of Bali abounds at this chic venue. Sit in the dining room, replete with linen and silver, or on one of the more romantic cushioned bamboo platforms that bridge the narrow garden oasis. The lunch menu is light, featuring dishes such as *malai köfte,* spicy vegetarian fritters in a curry sauce, or the mouth-burning Bali chile burger (if you dare). The dinner menu has all the bells and whistles of a Western steakhouse. Try the mixed grill of U.S. beef loin, spareribs, pork cutlet, and Nuerberger sausages; or order the Singapore chile crab, savory and spicy fresh black Bali crabs served with a big ol' bib. At the high end of the menu is the giant seafood grill, cooked and served on a hot lava stone. To finish off your meal, there's a respectable stock of brandy and cognac.

Poppies Gang II, Kuta. ✆ **361/758605.** www.korirestaurant.co.id. Main courses Rp30,000–Rp140,000 ($2.65–$13/£1.80–£8.55). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–11pm.

Poppies Restaurant ★★ INDONESIAN/EUROPEAN Poppies has a 30-year tradition of serving Indonesian and international specials on the busy beach. It's the place for your Western fix and is certainly the prettiest restaurant in the Kuta area: a garden setting with crawling vines overhead that keep the hot sun at bay, accompanied by babbling pools and waterfalls. Indonesian dishes include an outstanding *ikan pepes*—mashed fish cooked in a banana leaf with fine spices and very spicy local "pickles" (beware). The *mie goreng,* loaded with shrimp and vegetables, is also good. Service is slow, but this is a good place to dawdle.

Poppies Cottages, Poppies Lane I, Kuta. ✆ **361/751059.** www.poppiesbali.com. Reservations recommended. Men must wear shirts. Main courses Rp20,000–Rp50,000 ($1.80–$4.45/£1.20–£3.05). AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

TJ's Restaurant ★★ MEXICAN Set up more like a typical Asian bistro, TJ's is a real Bali original. Stop in, if only for one of the famous frozen margaritas and to listen to some good tunes in this laid-back, open-air spot. Meals start with homemade corn chips, delicious dips, and an extensive menu of specials. TJ's advertises the "best burgers in town," and though the jury is still out on that one, most everything from the quesadillas to the fish Veracruz is delicious. Order up, kick back, and enjoy the vibe in this popular spot.

Poppies Lane 1/24, Kuta. ✆ **361/751093.** Main courses Rp35,000–Rp55,000 ($3.10–$4.90/£2.15–£3.35). MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Seminyak

This northern stretch of the Kuta Beach area is *the* place for fine dining and hip nightlife. The restaurants listed below are only a few of the many bistros popping up. Check out Jalan Laksmana, called "Eat Street," crammed with a growing number of international cafes and restaurants. Highlights include modern Indonesian cuisine at **Chandi** (✆ **361/731060;** www.chandibali.com); Moroccan delights at **Khaima** (✆ **361/7423925;** www.khaimabali.com); and home-style Italian pizza and pastas at **Trattoria** (✆ **361/737082;** www.trattoriabali.com).

Kafe Warisan ★ FRENCH It's fine international dining in a Balinese setting here in this open courtyard of frangipani trees overlooking green rice paddies. The standards, service, and menu are equally sophisticated, and with so many choices, you might have to come back to try everything. Be sure to order the raw oysters if you're game. Kafe Warisan serves the finest cuts of meat imported from Australia, along with local venison. On the lighter side, try the grilled Tasmanian salmon or rosemary chicken breast. You'll be treated to an extensive wine list and a range of California wines by the glass. Stop by the boutique to peruse the collection of beaded dresses, silk sarongs, jewelry, antique batik, and other collectibles.

Jalan Kerobokan 38, Seminyak. ✆ **361/731175.** www.kafewarisan.com. Reservations required. Main courses Rp65,000–Rp145,000 ($5.80–$13/£3.95–£8.85). AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–4pm and 7–11pm.

Ku De Ta ★★ BISTRO This is Kuta's "Europe meets Asia" international bistro, aimed at an upscale clientele. It's also one of the town's hippest catwalks. The best time to go is at sunset, for the ocean views and lounge-worthy patio. Though the daytime ambience is dominated by the nearby beach, at night it's all about romantic lighting in the restaurant's open-air, minimalist rotunda. Add an elegant bar and a cigar lounge—complete with putting green—and you've got an all-purpose evening out. Happily, what comes out of the kitchen makes you want to stay: Try the signature dish of slow-roasted, yellow-curry duck or the chile-and-sea-salted squid with a mango/papaya marmalade. The cigar

lounge is open from 6pm until late. The place roars with the carefree laughter of the ridiculously rich.

Jalan Oberoi 9, Seminyak. ✆ **361/736969.** www.kudeta.net. Reservations recommended. Main courses Rp140,000–Rp330,000 ($13–$29/£8.55–£20). AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–midnight. Bar open later.

La Lucciola ★ ITALIAN If there's a see-and-be-seen spot among the Kuta crowd, it's La Lucciola. Even breakfast draws the beautiful people, and why not, with its prime beachfront location on this deserted stretch of Legian. Morning eye-poppers include tasty ricotta hot cakes and smoked-salmon scrambled eggs on toasted focaccia. The dinner menu is equally enticing, with choice offerings such as lemon-grass bok-choy risotto with sesame ginger, or oven-baked snapper with braised shallots and oregano. The seafood specials, calamari, and a unique prawn-and-snapper pie are tops, in addition to a complement of good pasta and traditional Italian fare. End with a bracing espresso and tiramisu.

Jalan Laksmana (Oberoi), Temple Petitenget, Kerobakan. ✆ **361/730838.** Main courses Rp40,000–Rp150,000 ($3.55–$13/£2.45–£9.15). AE, MC, V. Daily 9am–midnight.

Made's Warung ★★ Finds INDONESIAN This is a longtime Bali favorite, and for good reason. The original location is an open-air place at street side in Kuta, but the new space in Seminyak is a big improvement—it's protected from the road and bustling with people, not beeping motorbikes. If it's busy, and it often is, don't be surprised if you end up sharing a table. *Gado gado*, satay, and curries are all recommended, and the price is right. Fun surprises on the menu include a bagel with smoked marlin, tofu burgers, and Caesar salad. Don't pass up the daily specials, particularly the fresh fish. Beverage choices range from iced coffee and juices to some very potent booze concoctions (be warned).

Br. Pando Mas, Kuta (✆ **361/732130**), and Jalan Raya Seminyak, Seminyak (✆ **316/732130**). www.madeswarung.com. Main courses Rp12,000–Rp30,000 ($1.05–$2.65/75p–£1.85). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–midnight.

Ryoshi ★ JAPANESE At Ryoshi, every day is special, the prices are reasonable for sushi, and there's all kinds of other Japanese fare that's done just right (just ask the many Japanese guests). Be sure to try the butterfish, a deepwater whitefish with a rich texture and savory flavor—not to be missed. There are locations all over the island, but the Seminyak outlet is by far the best (with the busy shop in Kuta a close second).

Jalan Raya Seminyak 17, Seminyak (✆ **361/731152**); Jalan Melasti 42A, Kuta (✆ **361/750504**); plus additional locations in Sanur, Ubud, and even on tiny Gili Trawangan island near Lombok. Main courses from Rp35,000 ($3.10/£2.15); a la carte sushi dishes from Rp10,000 (90¢/60p). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Surfers from all over are drawn to Kuta's stupendous breakers, which are at their best between March and July. Surf shops line the main drags and can help with rentals or tide information. Any hotel can arrange a private or group lesson, or you can contact **Rip Curl School of Surf** (✆ **361/735858;** www.ripcurlschoolofsurf.com). Beginners start off at Kuta or Legian (with soft-sand beaches), but the legendary surf is at the low reef breaks and "barrels" of **Kuta Reef** at the southern end.

Unfortunately, the same surf makes recreational swimming virtually impossible. Even past the breakers, the current can be too strong. Pay close attention to swimming warnings and restrictions, and be very careful if you do swim. Tanning and splashing to cool off are about all that are left to do.

You can book adventure tours to destinations across the island using Kuta as a hub. For day trips to Ubud, the volcanoes, or the temples of central Bali, contact **Sobek Tours** (✆ **361/287059**), **Bali Adventure Tours** (✆ **361/721480;** www.baliadventuretours.com), or **Bali Discovery Tours** (✆ **361/286283;** www.balidiscovery.com). If money is no obstacle, take a ride on a helicopter to remote stretches of the island and pass over volcanoes and jungle scenery. Contact **Air Bali** (✆ **361/767466;** www.airbali.com) for details.

And if the kids aren't getting enough of a kick out of the busy beach at Kuta, take 'em to the **Waterbom Park,** in the south end of Kuta on Jalan Kartika Plaza (✆ **361/755676;** www.waterbom.com).

SHOPPING

Shopping in Kuta is inevitable. Even if you aren't interested in buying anything, the touts are quick to steer you none-too-subtly to their merchandise (usually by waving it in your face). The streets (particularly **Poppies Gang II**) are lined with stalls offering tie-dyed sarongs, shorts, swimsuits, knockoff brand-name cologne, hats, and wristwatches. Given the hard sell, this might be the best place to hone your bargaining skills.

The eastern side of Jalan Laksmana (aka "Beat Street") is full of fledgling clothing designers, many of them foreigners living in Bali. Some of the better women's boutiques include Franklin Lee at No. 34A, Magali Pascal at No. 65B, and Paul Ropp No. 39 with his wild Betsey-Johnson-meets-South-Asian styles. Uluwatu Lace, with locations around the island, sells elegant styles. These labels aren't cheap—dresses and shirts start around $100 (£67).

For the more budget minded, a nice chain of beachwear and clubby outfits can be found at Body & Soul, with several outlets in Kuta and around the island. Surfer Girl, on Jalan Legian (✆ **361/752693**), has a good collection of women's swimwear and active clothing, while a coed selection can be found at **Jungle Surf,** also on Jalan Legian (✆ **361/756644;** www.junglesurfworld.com).

Kuta Square has many international brands including Nike, Polo, and Armani, plus fast-food outlets such as McDonald's and KFC. The Discovery Mall contains the British department store Marks & Spencer, along with a Starbucks and Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. The **Galleria Bali** (✆ **361/761945;** www.dfsgalleria.com)—a new luxury shopping mall with duty-free goods by Chanel, Coach, and other big brands—offers shuttles from many hotels.

Spa Treatments

There are some fine spas in the area, and most large hotels and resorts offer at least basic spa services. The newest spa in Kuta is **Theta Spa,** Jalan Kartika Plaza, on the beach, within the Ramada Bintang Bali Resort (✆ **361/755726;** www.thetaspa.com), a pristine, white, two-level sanctuary overlooking the ocean. Also equally luxurious are the Anantara Spa, on the top floor of the hotel, and the Spa at the Legian. For a good-value massage, head to the expat-friendly **Jari Menari** (✆ **361/736740;** Jalan Raya Basangkasa; www.jarimenari.com) in Seminyak. For a bikini wax (which is hard to come by in Bali, strangely enough), head to **Glo** (Jalan Kunti; ✆ **361/766762**) or the **Westin Spa** at the Westin Resort Nusa Dua (p. 617).

For books, stop by **Periplus,** with locations in Kuta Square (✆ **361/763988**), in Seminyak near Made's Warung (✆ **361/734843**), and even at the airport.

KUTA & SEMINYAK AFTER DARK

Kuta is party central, going full-on from 11pm until dawn every night. Clubs and bars abound, each with its own flavor, though they're mostly "same-same but different." Thankfully, it is all pretty family friendly and not the go-go bar scene you'd find in parts of Thailand and other Southeast Asian destinations.

For the club crowd, the hottest spot at the moment is **Hu'u Bar** ★, Jalan Dhyana Pura, Seminyak (✆ **361/736443;** www.huubali.com), a beachside bar and nightclub that hosts international DJs. Other contenders, all located nearby, include the **Living Room** (✆ **361/735735;** www.thelivingroom-bali.com), **Bacio,** and its next-door neighbor **Double Six** (✆ **361/733067;** www.doublesixclub.com). A good late-night spot is **Paparazzi** (✆ **361/731155**), which only gets going around 2am. The much-hyped bistro and bar **Ku De Ta** ★ (p. 610) still remains popular, particularly for cocktails at sunset. **SOS,** the rooftop bar at the Anantara (p. 607), features lounge-worthy padded beds that offer prime views of ocean sunsets. For clubbing in Kuta, try **Bounty,** on Jalan Legian (✆ **361/752529**), which is built to look like a galleon and has a lively dance floor and bar often playing R&B and hip-hop. Watch out for drunk Australians and the foam parties. **Kama Sutra** (✆ **361/761999**), chock-full of local teenagers, is a busy club on the north end of Kuta; it has nightly shows and features local bands. The Hard Rock Hotel's **Centerstage** (✆ **361/761869**) sometimes has good live acts, though it's known to be crowded with tourists.

SIDE TRIPS FROM KUTA

Uluwatu ★★ is a spectacular pinnacle of land at the far south of Bali. A visit at dusk reveals a sunset panorama framed by frolicking monkeys. At the right times of year, it has some of the best surfing in the world. Arrange trips to Uluwatu, Tanah Lot (see below), or sights listed later in this chapter under "Side Trips from Ubud" (p. 631) by contacting any hotel concierge or tour desk. Daily car rental (with driver) starts as low as $20 (£13).

Tanah Lot ★ Founded by a Brahmin priest in the 16th century, the temple at Tanah Lot is notable less for its construction than for its spectacular setting, high on craggy bluffs overlooking the Java Sea. This is a truly magnificent example of how well temples in Bali are wedded to their locations, be they lakeside, mountainside, or seaside. Legend has it that a Brahmin priest had a rivalry with the local, established priest that nearly led to his expulsion from the order; instead, he meditated so hard he pushed Tanah Lot "out to sea," where it rests on an inlet that actually becomes an island at high tide. The walk from the parking lot is not as long or as steep as at many other sites, and there are no stairs. Non-Hindus cannot enter the temple, but may access the other parts of the complex strung out across the rocks. Many of these afford stunning views. Try to come at sunset, when Tanah Lot is truly glorious.

15km (9¼ miles) west of Denpasar. Admission Rp3,000 (25¢/20p). Open during daylight hours.

5 JIMBARAN BAY ★★

Jimbaran has some of the best sandy beaches in South Bali, and the clear, calm water is great for swimming. Developers were quick to realize this; thus Jimbaran now hosts some

of the finest high-end resorts on the island. Despite development, the town still looks like a fishing village, with small mom-and-pop seafood shacks serving up some of the best fish dishes on the island. It's a worthy day trip from Kuta for good eats alone, and the many resorts make it a comfy place to stay.

GETTING THERE

Jimbaran is on the road to Nusa Dua, south of Kuta. Cabs are plentiful.

WHERE TO STAY

The area around Uluwatu temple is being developed by a number of luxury resorts. Keep an eye out for the **Alila Villas Uluwatu** (www.alilavillas.com) to open in June 2009.

Four Seasons Resort at Jimbaran Bay ★★★ The very picture of luxury, the exquisitely landscaped grounds of the Four Seasons are on a stunning hillside overlooking the bay. The layout is meant to suggest a series of Balinese villages, each thatched villa consisting of a large bedroom, generous dressing area, and marble bathroom with oversize tub. The little things stand out: thick towels and fancy bathroom amenities, two sinks, cool garden showers, a library with books for borrowing and Internet access, and snap-to service everywhere you look. There are even top spa services and a cooking school. The resort's horizon pool blends seamlessly with the ocean blue, and there are other small pools and lots of private corners where you can relax and escape from it all. Walk or be driven in a golf cart down to the beach, passing *bales* (open-air pavilions) and viewing spots along the way. The luxe beach club has all the same amenities as the pool, plus plenty of watersports activities including surfing, kayaking, and sailing on catamarans. Though the other Four Seasons Bali property, at Sayan, is equally luxurious, Jimbaran is preferable for its romantic vibe, convenient location, and superb service.

Jimbaran, Bali. ✆ **361/701010.** Fax 361/701020. w www.fourseasons.com. 147 units. $680–$870 (£453–£580) 1-bedroom villa; $1,600–$2,900 (£1,067–£1,933) 2-bedroom villa and Royal Villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; 2 outdoor pools; tennis courts; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, stereo w/CD player, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Jimbaran Puri Bali ★★ The pioneer resort on Jimbaran beach, the Puri Bali, originally the Pansea, has stylish, self-contained garden cottages scattered among lily ponds, coconut trees, and Balinese statuary, set back from the beach. All cottages have terraces, shaded by umbrellas, with privacy-providing screens and outdoor deck showers. Rooms are done in carved teak under thatched roofing, with mosquito netting and natural linen touches. Bathrooms have sunken tubs and all the goodies. The resort is a haven of privacy and calm, a good choice for getting away from it all.

Jalan Uluwatu, Jimbaran, Bali. ✆ **361/701605.** Fax 361/701320. w www.jimbaranpuribali.com. 41 cottages. $200–$370 (£133–£247) basic cottage; $320–$427 (£213–£285) pool cottage; $430–$760 (£287–£507) pool villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Karma Kandara ★★ Kids Newly opened in 2008, this unique and luxurious set of villas sits on a stunning cliff near the Uluwatu temple. The Karma Kandara is the latest of a string of resorts the Karma group has opened in Bali, along with Australia and Thailand. This is the brainchild of John Spence, a music entrepreneur who has worked with singers such as Boy George. He models his resorts after ultraluxury resorts including the

Aman, but here he has added a more family-oriented feel, with amenities such as a complimentary kids' club. The small and unassuming lobby leads down a path lined with high stone walls, giving each villa optimum privacy. The villas are decorated with modern teak furnishing and earth tones, but the real draw is the vantage points each of the villas offer: Each private infinity pool leads the eye to a horizon of unobstructed views of the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean restaurant di Mare offers fine dining, and for the more adventurous, a steep funicular ride down to a private beach brings guests to the Nammos Beach Club bar and restaurant with its own secluded beach.

Jalan Villa Kandara, Banjar Wijaya Kusuma, Ungasan, Bali. ✆ **361/8482200.** Fax 361/8482201. www.karmakandara.com. 40 villas. $565–$7,000 (£377–£4,667) villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; golf (nearby); yoga; fitness center; spa; complimentary kids' club; tour desk; business center w/Internet access; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; cooking class; cliff inclinator; private beach. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, Wi-Fi, fully equipped kitchen, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone, private pool, barbecue.

WHERE TO DINE

For lunch or an early evening dinner (or just a drink), the best place to head is **Nammos Beach Club** at Karma Kandara (see above). You'll descend in a funicular down a steep cliff to a small strip of protected beach, where an alternative scene of hip young families (think parents who haven't given up the Ibiza lifestyle, with kids in tow) and 20-somethings chow on pizza and tapas and drink martinis. Try **PJ's** at the Four Seasons for a beachside Sunday brunch. But remember, folks come from far and wide for the good, fresh seafood barbecue, priced by the pound, served at beachside. Look for **Menega Cafe** (✆ **361/705888;** www.menega.com/cafe.html), which stands out for its more unique grilling approach among the row of restaurants that basically offer the same thing. Lobster and snapper are served with dipping sauces, rice, cucumber salad, and spinach cooked in sweet chile. Follow it up with some fresh fruit. It's romantic at sunset and afterward by candlelight—and it's inexpensive, too.

6 NUSA DUA ★

In the 1970s, a French firm, commissioned by the Indonesian government, came up with the idea for a self-contained resort complex to "minimize the impact of tourism on the Balinese culture." It chose this 300-hectare (741-acre) tract of undeveloped land, devoid of any infrastructure, and basically transformed it into a theme park. Nusa Dua is now a roster of five-star, all-inclusive properties, all secluded and finely manicured. The beaches are clean and blissfully tout-free, but it can all seem a bit sterile. Still, it's suitable for families and business conventions.

GETTING THERE

Most hotels in Nusa Dua offer airport pickup, but you can find shuttles and cheap taxis at the airport and in Kuta. (Be sure to take only the official blue-and-yellow metered taxis in Kuta.) *Bemos* from Denpasar go to Nusa Dua by way of Kuta and Jimbaran.

GETTING AROUND

These big resorts make it so comfortable, you won't have to leave the grounds—but even the most starry-eyed honeymooners might want a break from expensive hotel meals. Most hotel taxis are rentable at an exorbitant $11 (£7.30) per hour; it's smarter to hire a

car and driver for a day from a private company such as **Amertha Dana** (✆ **361/735406**). A new swanky mall in Nusa Dua, the **Bali Collection** (✆ **361/771662;** www.bali-collection.com), has an hourly shuttle that makes the rounds to most of the hotels.

WHERE TO STAY

Nusa Dua

Nusa Dua is like a Disneyland of high-end hotels and resorts. Most of the properties have their own private beaches and many offer babysitting (some include it in the price of the room), making it a good option for families (unless otherwise noted). A good share of honeymooners come here as well. The atmosphere is a bit sterile, but you'll at least avoid the touts and tacky tourists in places such as Kuta.

Very Expensive

Amanusa ★★★ It doesn't get any better than this. Typical of the refined Aman resorts in Ubud and Candi (among others), the Amanusa boasts a magnificent setting on a high hilltop overlooking a golf course and the beaches of Nusa Dua beyond. It comes with quite a price tag, but a visit to Amanusa is an invitation to service that is gracious and intuitive, and to accommodations that are over-the-top luxurious while remaining in harmony with the surroundings. Rooms are crafted in rich redwood with four-poster beds, sunken tubs, and outdoor and indoor showers. Each suite has a small *bale,* or covered sitting area, with a stylish daybed for lounging. Cozy nooks, such as the library, abound; the central 24m (79-ft.) pool is stunning; and in-house dining at the Terrace is an experience in itself, with great views and delicious local cuisine. The beach club is just a short drive down the hill; it's a collection of private *bales* that front the Bali Golf and Country Club property. The staff can arrange just about anything for you, from local cycling excursions to island cruises to cooking classes, shopping, and adventure tours.

Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/772333.** Fax 361/772335. www.amanresorts.com. 35 units. $750–$1,100 (£500–£733) suite; $1,150–$1,750 (£767–£1,167) pool suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; beach club; golf course; 2 tennis courts; watersports equipment rental; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; courtesy car; business center; boutiques; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; library w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD and stereo, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Balé ★★ *Balé* means "bungalow" in Balinese, but the moniker is rather modest—this is an absolutely beautiful collection of villas set on a hillo verlooking the ocean. After being ushered into a high-ceilinged, open-air lobby, you'll climb a set of steps that lead to the villas, all of which are walled off for privacy. Each has its own plunge pool and a daybed in the courtyard for lounging. The interiors are elegantly simple, with large bathrooms and outdoor showers. Rivers of water flow around the property; the scent of the tropical flower ylang-ylang wafts throughout. While not set right on the beach, the Balé has a shuttle that whisks you to the water in 2 minutes. The resort is popular with yuppies and a fair number of gay couples as well. For adults seeking peace, an added bonus is that no children 14 and under are allowed.

If the private-villa-no-children-allowed concept appeals to you but the Balé seems too expensive, try the slightly cheaper **Kayumanis** (✆ **361/770777**), a property nearby that features 20 private villas, though it doesn't have the view and the beach access that Balé provides.

Jalan Raya Nusa Dua Selatan, P.O. Box 76, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/775111.** Fax 361/775222. www.thebale.com. 20 units. $550–$800 (£367–£533) double; $900 (£600) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. No children 14 and under accepted. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; nearby golf; fitness center; spa; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; library w/free Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

St. Regis Bali ★★ From the private concierge who whisks you through airport immigration and baggage claim to the personal butler who is assigned to each room or villa, the emphasis at the St. Regis is on service. A number of the private villas have private access to a 3,408-sq.-m (36,680-sq.-ft.) swimmable lagoon that sits at the center of the resort, while other villas sit directly beachfront. Rooms and villas are tastefully decorated with Balinese and colonial-style furniture and come with all the comforts such as an iPod dock, stand-alone bathtub, private balconies, and gardens that one can expect from a top-rated resort. The resort also pays special attention to food, with top-notch quality at all the outlets. Kayuputi, on the beach, is a stylish glass-walled restaurant with an open kitchen that offers delicious Continental fare. Boneka serves delicious made-to-order, table-service buffet breakfasts with delicacies including sashimi, oysters, and foie gras, and the Gourmand Deli has delicious, not-to-be-missed ice cream flavors such as strawberry and marscapone, and passion fruit and praline.

Kawasan Pariwisata Nusa Dua Lot S6, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/8478111.** Fax 361/8478099. www.stregis.com/bali. 123 units, including suites, villas, and residences. $750–$900 (£500–£600) suite; $1,400–$8,500 (£933–£5,667) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 1 bar; 2 very large outdoor pools; nearby golf; fitness center; spa; watersports equipment rental; tour desk; business center; shopping; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; clinic; wedding chapel. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Laguna Resort & Spa Nusa Dua ★ The hotel formerly known as the Sheraton underwent a $7.5-million renovation and name change in 2006, though it's still managed by Starwood, Sheraton's parent company. The feel of the Sheraton still lurks, but the rooms, once flower-fussy, have turned modern. The main draws remain the beachfront and the meandering lagoonlike pool, which can be accessed directly by ladders from some of the ground-floor rooms. Bathrooms are large and done in marble. The amenities, such as the classy restaurants and spa, have also undergone dramatic face-lifts.

P.O. Box 77, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/771327.** Fax 361/771326. www.luxurycollection.com/bali. 270 units. $258–$420 (£172–£280) double; $515–$2,800 (£343–£1,867) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; 7 outdoor pools; nearby golf; tennis court; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment rental; tour desk; car and motorbike rental; business center w/Wi-Fi; shopping; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Westin Resort Nusa Dua Value Kids This resort is for those who like to combine a few hours of telecommuting with their vacation. Business travelers will appreciate the wireless Internet access, a great club lounge, and nicely appointed rooms with a safe that's big enough for a laptop. The hotel is also a good choice for families, with little touches for the kids including a separate check-in area, special buffet counter at breakfast, and, most important, a kids' club with complimentary babysitting all day along. With these amenities and rates as low as $150 (£100) for a double during the low season, the Westin is a bargain for families. Beachside daybeds, where you can get spa treatments, are the perfect place to unwind. It's a high-quality version of the McDonald's experience—that is, you know what you're going to get: great service, fantastic dining options, and beds so comfortable they're branded the "Heavenly Beds."

P.O. Box 36, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/771906.** Fax 361/771908. www.starwood.com. 346 units. $390 (£260) double; $640 (£425) suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 4 bars; 3 outdoor pools (and kids' pool); nearby golf; tennis court; fitness center; spa; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment rental; tour desk; car and motorbike rental; shopping; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; meeting room. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, Internet access, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, IDD phone.

Tanjung Benoa

Just north of Nusa Dua along the coast is the fishing village of Benoa. The labyrinth of streets in this town makes for a good stroll, certainly more interesting than sterile Nusa Dua. The coast here is lined with upscale hotels and resorts, such as the **Conrad** (✆ **361/778788;** www.conradhotels.com), which features a fantastic two-level spa with a private pool and bar, both of which you can visit even if you aren't a guest (stay elsewhere, as the rooms aren't particularly special here). This is a popular spot for jet-ski and motorboat rentals, as well as parasailing, so the beach is always busy.

Moderate

Novotel Coralia Benoa Bali ★ This hotel is slightly more upscale than your typical Novotel. Public spaces are grand, and the design throughout reflects Bali. The resort straddles the main street: The ocean side is more expensive and has better beach access, while the "garden" side is quiet and secluded. Better still, for the price, are the "beach cabanas," even bigger suites in semiprivate bungalows (two per pavilion), complete with outdoor stone tubs—most of them honeymoon-worthy. Rooms throughout are big, bright, and airy, decorated in a minimalist Asian style with coconut wood. Each of the three pools has its own flair, though none is very big. Lots of activities, including aerobics, soccer, a kids' club, and dance and cooking lessons, will keep you on the run if you like. The free shuttle to Nusa Dua is convenient for touring, but given that this is the best of both worlds—a terrific resort and authentic Bali—it's hard to see that you would need it. The ocean up this way is much deeper and better for swimming, too.

Jalan Pratama Tanjung Benoa, P.O. Box 39, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/772239.** Fax 361/772237. www.novotelbali.com. 190 units. $115–$162 (£77–£108) double; $205–$252 (£137–£170) beach cabana. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; 3 outdoor pools; tennis court; fitness center; spa; kids' club; tour desk; shuttle service; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library; meeting room; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Rumah Bali ★★ (Value) This bed-and-breakfast is one of the best values in Bali. The bungalows feature outdoor kitchens and generous bathrooms (with outdoor shower); deluxe bungalows get their own plunge pool. The people who run this hotel also own Bumbu Bali, the restaurant and cooking school, and they'll send a chef over to cook all your meals if you wish. The peaceful pool area is set in a garden, while the beach is just a 5-minute walk away. If you're on a budget, you can stay here and use the beachside pool at the restaurant Tao for something close to a five-star experience.

Jalan Pratama Tanjung Benoa, P.O. Box 132, Nusa Dua, Bali. ✆ **361/771256.** Fax 361/771258. www.balifoods.com. 10 units. $100–$125 (£67–£83) bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; outdoor pool; tennis court; cooking school. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, kitchen, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Nusa Dua has some fine dining, mostly at the hotels, all with high prices for this part of the world. **Kayuputi** at the St. Regis (p. 617) serves delicious Continental and Mediterranean cuisine in a stand-alone modern white bungalow on the beach. The outdoor tables, covered with trellises, are particularly romantic. **Bumbu Bali** (Jalan Pratama; ✆ **361/774502;** www.balifoods.com), run by former Grand Hyatt chef Heinz von Holzen, serves authentic Balinese food in a well-appointed environment. The restaurant also offers entertaining **cooking classes** ★★ on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Across from the Ramada Resort is the fusion restaurant **Tao** (Jalan Pratama 96; ✆ **361/772902;** www.taobali.com), decorated with Buddhist statues and featuring a lagoon pool, lounge chairs, and beachside tables where diners are free to laze about all day.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Unlike Kuta, the surf here is a considerable distance offshore, making swimming in the clear blue-green water most pleasant at high tide (at low tide, it's only ankle-high). It's a popular surf, windsurf, and jet-ski spot. Dive excursions, all arranged by the hotels, will probably take you to areas closer to Sanur or to Amed and Tambulen in the northeast.

The **Bali Golf and Country Club** (✆ **361/771791;** www.baligolfandcountryclub.com) sits at the southern tip of the island and has sweeping views of the beaches and clear waters off Nusa Dua. It has a fine course, worth the whopping $142 (£95) outlay to the serious enthusiast.

SHOPPING

A mall called the **Bali Collection** (✆ **361/771662;** www.bali-collection.com) offers some of the same shopping you'll find in Kuta (without the crowded streets and the touts), as well as a Starbucks and the Japanese department store Sogo, which has great cosmetic counters and name-brand clothing labels.

7 UBUD ★★

For a thorough exploration of Balinese culture and tradition—and a good dose of comfort and quiet—Ubud is the place. Though unabashedly touristic, the town is the cultural pulse of the island, the richest region in Bali for art production, and the very reason why so many expat artists and collectors have made Bali their home. Ubud has a royal legacy and hosts the **Royal Palace,** a center for cultural performances and dance. In and among the smaller streets of town, you'll find refined boutiques, chic galleries, and cool trinket shops, alongside open-air cafes that swallow passersby on lazy days. Outside the busy town labyrinth, the phosphorescent rice paddies, virgin jungle, gorges, and river valleys of this hilly Shangri-la are ripe for exploration. Ubud's central location makes the whole island accessible as a day trip. About the only thing it doesn't have is a beach, but they're all a short drive away.

GETTING THERE

Many hotels in the area offer pickup service, and taxis connect from the airport, about an hour away. *Bemos* drop you in the center of town, while the tourist shuttles have their own stops, usually on one of the two main drags.

GETTING AROUND

Central Ubud is small enough to see on foot, and hotels away from the main action generally provide regular shuttles into town. The main street is Jalan Raya, which runs east-west; Monkey Forest Road runs perpendicular. Transport touts in town are quite aggressive; **minivans** are for hire on every corner for either day trips or the short jaunt across town. A superb private driver is **Gusti Ngurah Nariasa** (✆ **081/23928171**), who often works for the Chedi Club.

Ubud is a good place to rent a motorbike (Rp50,000/$4.45/£3.05 per day) if you're an experienced rider. Bicycles are available for hire at two or three street-side locations along Monkey Forest Road for about Rp10,000 (90¢/60p).

VISITOR INFORMATION & TOURS

The **information kiosk,** on Jalan Raya (✆ **361/973285**), on the south side of the main street near the intersection with Monkey Forest Road, is a good place to start. There are

 also travel agencies all over town, each offering competitive prices for day trips and shuttles to other tourist areas.

Fast Facts Ubud

Currency Exchange There are a number of small ATMs on the main road and along Monkey Forest Road. Storefront money changers are at every turn.

Internet Access There are Internet cafes every few steps in Ubud, but for the best service, head to the center of town and find **Ubud Music,** next to Ary's Warung on Jalan Raya (✆ **361/972515**), one of only a few with broadband.

Mail The post office is on the main road, but very far to the east. Major hotels offer postal service.

Telephones The area code in Ubud is **361.**

WHERE TO STAY

No matter what your budget is, Ubud has it all, from sublime honeymoon compounds to the humblest cottage. Below is an assortment of options, both in central Ubud and outside of town. Staying at the more rural properties might mean a long walk or ride, but the scenery is breathtaking. Many visitors come and spend a few nights before shopping around for someplace new.

Very Expensive

Amandari ★★★ If you have serious disposable income, a stay at the Amandari ensures the kind of luxurious seclusion and unrivaled service afforded celebrities (it's where Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall got married). Laid out like a fanciful Balinese village, the plush rooms are housed within huge stone cottages roofed in thatch. Each suite is enclosed in its own walled compound and appointed with every kingly comfort (some even have a private pool). Amandari is over-the-top without sacrificing local charm: There are outdoor tubs and indoor showers, Balinese decor, and a unique connection to the surrounding villages. Architects, anticipating local cermonial processions, have designed pathways and openings in the covered walks for the passage of tall, ritual palanquins. Village suites have a first-floor common room and a cozy upstairs loft bedroom done in wood, like a rustic treehouse with a quiet writing nook. The resort looks out over a beautiful jungle gorge; the Amandari's emerald-green infinity-edge pool mimics the color, to blend seamlessly with the green beyond. There is a free shuttle to Ubud, but it's hard to imagine wanting to leave very often. The terrific restaurant has a bar and serves local and European favorites.

Kedewatan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975333.** Fax 361/975335. w ww.amandari.com. 30 units. $675–$2,800 (£450–£1,867) double; $3,600 (£2,400) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; golf course; tennis courts; health club; spa; Jacuzzi; free bicycles; concierge; tour desk; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Chedi Club at Tanah Gajah ★★★ One of the best resorts in all of Bali, the Chedi Club offers a small number of luxurious yet cozy villas set in rice fields and accompanied

by highly tailored personal service. The freebies offered here—including breakfast brought to your villa, afternoon tea, evening drinks, yoga lessons, escorted treks, and airport transfers—make other hotels seem stingy. Oh, and there's also a personalized butler to take care of any other needs you might have. Your private courtyard offers shaded daybeds, plunge pools with rice-paddy views, a huge outdoor tub, and Bose speakers that link with an indoor stereo system that you can hook up to your iPod. The bedrooms, decorated in wood tones and Balinese art, are just as luxe. After a stay at the Chedi Club, it's likely that you'll compare every other resort to the experience and discover that they simply don't match up.

Jalan Goa Gajah, Tengkulak Kaja, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975685.** Fax 361/975686. www.ghmhotels.com. 20 units. $340–$620 (£227–£413) 1-bedroom villa; $420–$970 (£280–£647) 2-bedroom villa. Rates include breakfast, afternoon tea, and evening drinks. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; complimentary afternoon tea and evening drinks; outdoor pool; tennis court; health club; yoga; trekking; spa; shuttle service to Ubud; 24-hr. personal butler service; free laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD player, Bose stereo w/CD player, free high-speed Internet access, free minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

COMO Shambhala ★★★ This resort and wellness spa dubs itself "The Estate," assigns P.A.'s (personal assistants, that is) to its guests, and runs a raw-food restaurant, Glow, on its beautiful 40-hectare (100-acre) property set right on the steep Ayung River gorge. It easily earns its "Estate" title, satisfying guests of all sensibilities, from the ultrahigh-maintenance to those who are simply seeking to completely unwind. Each private, stand-alone villa comes decorated with elegant antiquelike furniture, a four-poster bed flanked with curtains, and beautiful semioutdoor bathrooms with classy fixtures. Balconies, which overlook lush jungle with chirping cicadas and lively squirrels, are outfitted with lounge chairs that make an ideal place to read and rest, while a nearby semiprivate infinity pool is available for lap swimming. The resort also encourages guests to experience its wellness programs. With half a dozen eighteen staff members including an Ayurvedic doctor, a psychologist, and a Pilates instructor, custom detox or therapy programs can be arranged for guests. Even if you don't stay here, it's worth a visit to try the delicious food at Glow and to do the 1-hour walk around the grounds, during which you'll come across seminatural swimming pools and private pavilions perfect for getting away from it all.

Begawan Giri, P.O. Box 54, Ubud, Gianyar, Bali. ✆ **361/978888.** Fax 361/978889. www.cse.como.bz. 20 units. $300–$1,350 (£200–£$900) 1-bedroom villa; $3,200 (£2,133) 2-bedroom villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 9 outdoor pools; health club; aqua therapy pool; tennis court; fitness center; jungle gym; Pilates; yoga; climbing wall; spa; tour desk; complimentary airport transfer; shop; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD player, CD player, free Wi-Fi and broadband, minibar, fridge, tea and coffee, safe, IDD phone.

Four Seasons Resort at Sayan ★★ The Four Seasons here is a masterpiece of planning that takes full advantage of its extraordinary setting right on the River Ayung. It's incredibly posh, though not intimidatingly so. You enter across a long bridge leading to a lily pond that, almost unbelievably, rests atop the lobby, all in an immense crater of rice terraces. The design throughout is ultramodern, but with references to Balinese tradition. Guests stay in two-story suites (bedroom below the sitting area), deluxe suites, or high-end villas with private plunge pools. Interiors are done in gleaming woods and natural fabrics, highlighted by precious local art and artifacts. Every room has views of the deep-green gorge and/or the river. Expect luxurious bathrooms with huge tubs, showers, and dressing areas, and more plush towels than a linen shop. The two-level horizon pool follows the serpentine shape of the river below. Pampering, of course, is at a maximum and includes "seamless" transfer between here and the Four Seasons at Jimbaran

 Bay; the staff takes care of everything—including, if you wish, your packing. There is also regular shuttle service to Ubud.

Sayan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/977577.** Fax 361/977588. www.fourseasons.com. 60 units. $460–$850 (£307–£567) 1-bedroom villa; $2,100 (£1,400) 2-bedroom villa; $3,100 (£2,067) 3-bedroom villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; health club; spa; boogie board, kayak, windsurfing, catamaran, and bike rentals available; tour desk; shopping; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; library w/games. *In room:* A/C, TV, stereo w/CD player, free high-speed Internet access, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Ubud Hanging Garden ★ Located at the end of a long, winding road, this recent addition to the local resort scene offers peace and isolation in a jungle environment 30 minutes away from Ubud by car. The property is set in a gorge that is so steep, it's served by a tram so that guests don't have to climb too many stairs. The two infinity pools are a great place to unwind, though you may never leave the comfort of your private plunge pool and courtyard. The well-appointed guest rooms feature four-poster beds, gigantic bathrooms with huge tubs, and floor-to-ceiling windows with jungle views.

Desa Buahan, P.O. Box 80571, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/982700.** Fax 361/982800. www.pansea.com. 38 units. $337–$537 (£225–£378) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 outdoor pools; spa; tour desk; airport transfer; shuttle service; laundry service; dry cleaning; library w/Internet access; rice-paddy trek. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Alila Ubud ★ Just one step down from the ultraluxe Amandari, the Alila has a beautiful campus with fine rooms, suites, and villas overlooking the stunning northern stretch of the Ayung gorge, one of the most scenic stretches of the popular rafting trips that go through here. The infinity-edge swimming pool was voted one of the "50 Most Spectacular Pools in the World" by *Travel + Leisure;* it's like a cube of water in other worldly (or at least unlikely) suspension over the spectacular gorge. Accommodations are large and luxe, with top amenities (though no bathtubs), and the Mandara Spa complex is as posh as they come. The deluxe rooms even have iPods. The resort is far from town, but it's perfectly self-contained and offers regular shuttle service.

Desa Melinggih Kelod, Payangan, Gianyar, Bali. ✆ **361/975963.** Fax 361/975968. www.alilahotels.com. 64 units. $260–$390 (£173–£260) double; $545–$710 (£363–£470) villa. AE, MC,V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; bike rental; concierge; tour desk; airport transfer; boutique; 24-hr. room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library and TV room w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Komaneka Resort ★ Located on Monkey Forest Road right in the center of town, the Komaneka is clean, modern, and chic. Tracing a long, narrow corridor ending in a small pool with an elegant vanishing edge, guest buildings are well away from street noise and have views of gardens and rice paddies. Accommodations are done in a cool, contemporary style with shiny marble tiles and spartan wooden furnishings. The decor employs lots of natural woods and fabrics, and the beds are hung with netting suspended from the thatched ceiling. Deluxe units have unique bathrooms: Some feature outdoor-type showers and tubs, while others have sunken marble tubs. The owners have just opened a new high-end resort north of town called **Komaneka Tanggayuda,** a more deluxe compound of suites and pool villas from $220 (£147).

Monkey Forest Rd., Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/976090.** Fax 361/977140. www.komaneka.com. 20 units. $200–$250 (£133–£167) double; $300 (£200) garden or pool villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; full spa; tour desk; car rental; shopping; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; library. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD player, CD player, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Maya Ubud Resort & Spa ★★ This fine resort is a short hop outside of Ubud proper (just to the east) and is set in a quiet, mountainous area surrounded by rice fields. The hotel's design makes elegant use of local materials, blended in an immaculate, contemporary style. Rooms reflect that refined simplicity, with cool white and yellow tones set against the dark wood of Art Deco furnishings. Floors are made of river stone and ceilings of thatch. The double-height lobby rotunda echoes the shape of a Dongsan Drum, a relic of an ancient culture and an important regional motif. The property stretches in a line of low-profile buildings all the way down to the river. An elevator transports you down the steep valley to the riverside, where the fine spa rooms literally hang over the rushing water; there's also a small restaurant and a riverside pool with a vanishing edge. Fine dining, spa facilities, and plenty of activities make the Maya quite self-sufficient, but regular shuttle service to town keeps you connected.

Jalan Gunung Sari, Peliatan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/977888.** Fax 361/977555. www.mayaubud.com. 108 units. $240–$250 (£160–£167) double; $340–$1,200 (£227–£800) villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 2 outdoor pools; tennis courts; comprehensive spa; Jacuzzi; yoga; Pilates; meditation; bike rental; tour desk; airport transfer; shopping; laundry service; dry cleaning; library w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Uma Ubud ★★ A sister resort to the luxurious COMO Shambhala, this set of boutique villas decorated in a minimalist white style are aimed at a hip, young, jet-setting audience who prefer to be close to central Ubud. White gauzy curtains cover four-poster beds and stand-alone bathtubs, and some rooms have nice views of the surrounding rice paddies. Though the property is significantly smaller than the COMO Shambhala, it does its best with its landscaping to create a relaxing environment, with a large central pool and pond. Kemiri, the resort's main restaurant, serves lively Asian dishes by Australian chef Chris Miller.

Jalan Raya Sanggingan, Banjar Lungsiakan, Kedewatan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/972448.** Fax 361/972449. www.uma.como.bz. 29 units. $245–$270 (£163–£180) villa double; $340–$490 (£227–£327) villa suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; comprehensive spa; yoga; Pilates; meditation; bike rental; tour desk; airport transfer; laundry service; dry cleaning; library w/free Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, complimentary coffee and tea, coffeemaker, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone, free Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Agung Raka Bungalows ★ Just south of central Ubud, these two-story thatched bungalows are arranged around a series of working rice paddies and surrounded by a thriving village arts community. Lower-end bungalows are basic two-story wood-and-bamboo constructions with rudimentary outdoor bathrooms and a staircase leading up to a cozy bedroom. Superior bungalows are single-occupancy A-frames with teak accents. The bathrooms here are large, modern courtyard facilities that include both a tile tub and a stone-floor shower. The suites are excellent: a dizzying spectacle of stone and marble, each big enough for four and great for two.

Pengosekan Village (2km/1¼ miles south of Ubud center), Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975757.** Fax 361/975546. www.agungraka.com. 19 units. $60 (£40) double; $70–$150 (£47–£100) bungalow. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; motorbike rental; tour desk; car rental; shuttle service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, IDD phone.

Alam Sari ★★ This model hotel offers an excellent combination of comfort, social responsibility, setting, and low price. Everything the Alam Sari does is with a thought toward the local economy, ecology, and culture. Decorative touches, such as the brightly dyed fabric and wood furniture, are made locally. The hotel almost exclusively employs villagers from neighboring Keliki to bolster the local economy. Environmentally friendly

touches are everywhere, from solar water heaters to the use of recycled paper. Rooms are lovely, with views of the gorge and looming volcano. The hotel is sufficiently self-contained, making the 20-minute ride to town only an occasional necessity. Traditional music is featured at night.

Keliki, Tromoi Pos 03, Kantor Pos Tegallalang (9km/5½ miles north of Ubud), Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/981420.** Fax 361/981421. www.alamsari.com. 12 units. $60 (£40) double; $70 (£47) suite; $110–$250 (£73–£167) family unit. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; bicycle rental; tour desk; car rental; laundry service; library; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, safe, IDD phone.

Ananda Cottages ★ Just north of Ubud proper, Ananda Cottages is atmospheric enough for the Balinese experience you're hoping for, yet situated far enough from the town center to discourage the tourist hordes. The rice fields and thatched cottages of this bungalow campus are almost more "Balinese" than real villages you might visit (where you'll find TVs instead of shrines, and rooting machines instead of hand tools). Cozy rooms are connected by paths along terraced retaining walls, which are lit at night with miniature coal-fed, torchlike flames. The cottages are bi-level brick huts with bamboo pavilion roofs. Downstairs rooms are the better choice, with outdoor tubs and patio living rooms. Upstairs rooms have modern bathrooms and small verandas. The pool is small, but set on an interesting raised rice terrace. The three new deluxe bungalows are very cozy and well worth the outlay.

Campuhan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975376.** Fax 361/975375. www.anandaubud.com. 60 units. $50–$60 (£33–£40) double without A/C; $70–$80 (£47–£53) double with A/C; $185 (£123) suite villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; shopping; 24-hr. room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C (in some units), minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Bali Spirit Hotel and Spa ★ Located a fair jaunt from central Ubud in the village of Nyuh Kuning, this is a reasonable alternative to the really high-end luxury hotels in the north of Ubud. At Bali Spirit, you get a great setting and comfortable rooms at a good price, without all the bells, whistles, and fees. The stunning hillside setting overlooks a river gorge. Large, well-appointed rooms come with small kitchen nooks and decks, with local fabrics and materials employed throughout. The pool is just right, a cozy perch with lounges overlooking the gorge, and there are traditional Balinese bathing pools in the holy river below. A fine spa offers a full range of services. There are regular shuttles to town, in addition to a car available to take you wherever you want to go "at a moment's notice." The lack of in-room TVs keeps your eyes on the beautiful hills.

P.O. Box 189, Nyuh Kuning Village, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/974013.** Fax 361/974012. www.balispirithotel.com. 25 units. $95–$135 (£63–£90) double; $145 (£97) villa. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; full spa; mountain-bike rental; tour desk; car rental; airport transfer; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; cooking school; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Hotel Tjampuhan ★★ This hotel is a tropical sanctuary with terraces that lead to a beautiful gorge, the Tjampuhan River, and the 900-year-old Gunung Lebah Temple. The hotel was built in 1928 for guests of the prince of Ubud and was chosen by Western artists Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet as headquarters for their art association, Pita Maha. All units have Balinese thatched roofs. Air-conditioned rooms are larger and have better views than fan rooms. Splurge for a Raja Room (or even Spies's own villa), with verandas overlooking the gorge. The grounds are done in beautiful stonework, and immaculate gardens line the path down to the river. There are two very pretty pondlike pools and another with cold spring water, perfect for hot days.

Jalan Raya Campuhan, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975368.** Fax 316/975137. 67 units. $67–$87 (£45–£60) double with fan; $90–$110 (£63) double with A/C; $164 (£109) Walter Spies villa. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 4 bars; 2 outdoor pools; full spa; tour desk; car rental; shopping; massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; library. *In room:* A/C (in some units), minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Ubud Sari Health Resort ★★ This place gets our top recommendation in this category—there's nothing like it at these prices. Nowhere else in Ubud will you find such lovely cottages, small but immaculate, with real rustic charm. Rooms are situated above a river, so many guests open the windows, hang the mossy net, and let the jungle sounds and rushing water sing them to sleep. Breakfast is served on your private balcony, and the staff is attentive without fawning. A meandering garden path leads to the rustic spa area (open to day visitors), which offers a cold plunge pool, herbal steam, sauna, and a roster of fine massage treatments at discount prices. Once you've checked in, you may not want to leave.

35 Jalan Kajeng, Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/974393.** Fax 361/976305. www.ubudsari.com. 10 units. $35–$75 (£23–£50) double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; extensive spa; whirlpool; Jacuzzi; steam room; sauna; tour desk; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, no phone.

Inexpensive

Other budget choices line Monkey Forest Road and the Jalan Hanoman; better still, turn down any little alley or side street that cuts across them.

Ubud Bungalow ★ These bungalows are a popular budget option in the middle of town (call ahead as it's often full). Basic rooms, all with balconies out front, are stacked two high in a long column down the length of this quiet property. There's a small pool and restaurant. Otherwise, you can just fend for yourself, which, given the central location right in the middle of busy Monkey Forest Road, won't require the use of survival skills. This is a very good budget choice.

Monkey Forest Rd., Ubud, Bali. ✆ **361/975537.** Fax 361/971298. 18 units. $30 (£20) double with fan; $40 (£27) double with A/C. V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; laundry service. *In room:* A/C (in some units), no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Ubud has many eateries, mostly international restaurants in the busy town center, though you'll also find small *warungs* or stands selling *babi guling* (suckling pig). Much of Ubud's fine dining comes with a Western price tag.

Ary's Warung ★ MODERN INDONESIAN Ary's gourmet European and Indonesian specialties have fans from around the world. Stop in for at least one of the honey-ginger-lime drinks (with or without the booze), and kick back on a couch street side for a bit of people-watching. The metallic, angular construction of this open-air bistro would look great in a big-city gallery district, but is a bit at odds with ancient Hindu temples and the adjacent Royal Palace. It is the place to see and be seen, however, and Ary's is quite pleasant at night, when tranquil trance music plays and candles light every corner. Second-floor dining gives you a good view of the busy street below or the bats swooping to catch bugs at dusk. The food is good—overpriced, but good. Try the gazpacho, perfect on a hot day, or the grilled goat-cheese salad. The grilled tuna and lamb cutlets are done to perfection, and the ponzu-grilled snapper is delicious. The tasting menu (Rp220,000/$20/£13) includes two glasses of house wine. Ary's also makes for a good meeting place or for reconnoitering when the kids are trekking and Mom is off shopping.

Main road. ✆ **361/975053.** www.dekco.com. Main courses Rp60,000–Rp150,000 ($5.35–$13/£3.65–£9.15). MC, V. Daily 10:30am–10pm (last order).

Batan's Waru ★★ INDONESIAN/EUROPEAN Tucked away on a pleasant side street, Batan's Waru is particularly atmospheric at night, when the entrance is lit with candles. The ambitious menu has traditional dishes beyond the usual suspects, and plenty of vegetarian options. For an appetizer, try *urap pakis,* wild fern tips with roasted coconut and spices, or *lemper ayam,* chicken dumplings simmered in a banana leaf. Uncle Karaman's Hummus is spicy and comes with grilled-pepper flatbread and tomato-mint relish. Everything is served with a dish of spicy condiments. Finish off with a perfect cup of decaf Illy-brand espresso. The restaurant also does smoked duck and a *babi guleng* feast, with a day's advance order, and there is a full menu of pasta, sandwiches, and light fare as well.

Jalan Dewi Sita. ✆ **361/977528.** www.baligoodfood.com. Main courses Rp15,500–Rp43,000 ($1.40–$3.80/95p–£2.60). AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–midnight.

Bebek Bengil (Dirty Duck) ★★ INDONESIAN/EUROPEAN The Dirty Duck is the best place to try Ubud's famous dish. First stewed in local spices, then deep-fried, the duck here is finger-lickin' good, but not quite as oily as in other restaurants. Another way to go is the stuffed chicken with shiitake, sprouts, and spinach. The menu also features salads, overstuffed crunchy sandwiches, and good veggie options. The atmosphere is romantic; book a table toward the back of the open-air restaurant, which looks out onto the paddy fields.

Padang Tegel (at end of street as it hooks into Monkey Forest Rd.). ✆ **361/975489.** www.agungraka.com/bebekbengil. Main courses Rp12,500–Rp35,000 ($1.10–$3.10/75p–£2.15). AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

Cafe Lotus ★ MODERN INDONESIAN/INTERNATIONAL The food here isn't half bad, but the real reason to come to Cafe Lotus is for the chance to dine in the shadow of the Pura Saraswati temple (p. 628). It's cozy in the shaded dining area or on bamboo platforms overlooking the temple. The menu features good Western options, pastas and such, some modified into fiery dishes with hot chiles, black olives, and hearts of palm. Try the Balinese Satay Lilit, a mixed-fish kabob with a hint of coconut, served on skewers and presented on a plate the size of a boat. The fresh health drinks are a delight. This is a good place to kick back when touring the town. Note that no beef is served due to the restaurant's proximity to the temple.

Main road. ✆ **361/975660.** www.lotus-restaurants.com/cafe-lotus-ubud. Main courses Rp25,000–Rp54,000 ($2.20–$4.80/£1.50–£3.30). AE, MC, V. Daily 8:30am–10:30pm (last order).

Indus ★ ECLECTIC Indus provides two floors of open-air dining overlooking the stunning Tjampuhan Ridge. It's a bit like a mafia don's house, with marble tile and columns. The dining area is under a high thatch roof with cozy, low-slung couches and chairs to one side. This is a great spot for coffee and an escape from the heat, or for a long, languid lunch. The setting alone makes it worth the trip, and the food is tops to boot. Sample the likes of beet-root and feta empanadas, grilled calamari tostada, or fine wraps and sandwiches. Be sure to try the Balinese *tenggiri* curry, a Spanish whitefish prepared in ginger and coconut (or, for a lighter choice, get the *tenggiri* salad). Indus also has an extensive tapas menu and good fruit smoothies. Save room for the homemade ginger ice cream or coconut crème caramel.

Jalan Raya Sargingan, Campuhan. ✆ **361/977684.** www.casalunabali.com. Dress is "neat casual." Main courses Rp27,000–Rp50,000 ($2.40–$4.45/£1.65–£3.05). AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

Mozaic ★★ (Value) INTERNATIONAL Chef Chris Salans' constant upgrades and refinements to food and decor since his restaurant opened in 2001 has turned Mozaic into one of Asia's top fine-dining destinations. Salans employs traditional French ingredients and methods but pays respect to his surroundings with Indonesian flavors such as spicy sambal sauce, turmeric, and cardamom. A recent renovation added a classy bar and lounge in the front and a private kitchen and chef's table in the back, where cooking classes are taught several times a week. Guests chose from several six-course, constantly changing tasting menus (which can be paired with wines), and excellent service assures the right pacing throughout the meal. Highlights from a recent meal include curry butter roasted yabbies (Australian crayfish), which came with a delectable truffle sauce, and a crispy seared foie gras served with mango purée. The restaurant offers excellent value for money. Salans, who has worked with New York chef David Bouley and Napa Valley chef Thomas Keller of the French Laundry fame, has finally come into his own.

Jalan Raya Sanggingan. ✆ **361/975768.** www.mozaic-bali.com. Reservations required. Tasting menu $50–$70 (£33–£47). AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 6–10:30pm.

Naughty Nuri's Warung and Grill ★★ BARBECUE/BALINESE This old expat hangout has the best barbecue in town, with ribs so tender the meat falls right off the bone. On Thursday, a regular shipment of fresh tuna arrives and the place fills right up. The burgers, dogs, and local curries and satay are also good. Free-flowing drinks (try the honkin' martinis) add to the laid-back, picnic-table atmosphere at street side. Bring your appetite, a high booze tolerance, and a good sense of humor.

Tromol Pos 219 (just across from the Nek a Art Museum on the road leading north of town). ✆ **361/977547.** Main courses Rp15,000–Rp60,000 ($1.30–$5.35/90p–£3.65). No credit cards. Daily 10am–10pm.

TeraZo ★★ MEDITERRANEAN The spacious interior of this hip bistro is simple yet welcoming, with terraces set behind a nice garden with decorative fountains. The menu is extensive. Cool tomato gazpacho is a welcome starter in the tropical heat, while the spring rolls are light and delicious. The eight-layer pie is a delicious pastry crust filled with smoked blue marlin, spinach, ricotta, and mushrooms. There's also a host of grilled items, fine pasta, and gourmet Asian-influenced dishes, such as the *nasi kuning,* yellow coconut rice with raisins, cashews, and strips of egg, or the *kue tiaun,* stir-fried rice noodles, chicken, and local greens. A tempting breakfast menu features surprises including ricotta blintzes topped with honey and fresh yogurt.

Jalan Suweta. ✆ **361/978941.** w www.baligoodfood.com. Main courses Rp60,000–Rp134,000 ($5.35–$12/£3.65–£8.15). AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–midnight.

Snacks & Cafes

Casa Luna, on the main road (✆ **361/977409**), is a longtime favorite with expats for its local and international cuisine, coffee, and desserts. (It also has cooking classes.) For desserts and ice cream, **Mumbul's Cafe,** also on the main road (✆ **361/975364**), is a tasty choice with a serene garden terrace. The town's best coffee shop is **Tutmak Warung Kopi,** on Jalan Dewi Sita, near Batan's Waru (✆ **361/975754**), with great desserts and a whole range of healthy treats, from salads to light lunches. There's also a good menu for kids.

Kafe, on Jalan Hanoman (✆ **361/970992;** www.balispirit.com), offers fantastic vegetarian mains, California-style burritos, coffee, and desserts. It also contains a yoga and massage center and a gift shop featuring crafts from nonprofit organizations.

Bali Buddha Cafe, Jalan Jembawan 1, in front of the post office to the east of town (✆ **361/976324;** www.balibuddhacafe.com), is a happening little expat spot with a small grocery store that sells good fresh bread, organic vegetables, healthy snacks, and supplements. Upstairs is a popular juice bar—a good place to meet long-staying folks or get info off the bulletin board. It's New Age central here, more or less.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Botanic Garden Ubud ★ Kids Created by a former German journalist who has retired in Ubud, the gardens are spread over 4.9 hectares (12 acres) and provide an excellent look at the variety of lush plant life that exists on the island. Highlights include the orchid greenhouse, a Muslim garden with a symmetrical tiled path, and the fruit tree area, where visitors can see how passion fruits ripen on the vine and dragon fruits grow on crazy-looking cacti. A labyrinth, purportedly the first in Bali, is a surefire hit with the kids.

Kutuh Kaja. ✆ **361/7463409.** www.botanicgardenbali.com. Admission Rp50,000 ($4.45/£3.05). Daily 8am–6pm.

Pura Saraswati ★★ The royal family commissioned this temple and water garden, dedicated to the Hindu goddess of art and learning, at the end of the 19th century. The main shrine is covered in fine carvings, and the *bale* houses (small pavilions) and giant *barong* masks are interesting. The restaurant **Cafe Lotus** (see above) is situated at the front, on the main street, so that diners can look out over the lovely grounds.

Jalan Raya Ubud. Free admission. Daily during daylight hours.

Puri Saren Agung (Royal Palace) ★ From the late 19th century to the mid-1940s, this was the seat for the local ruler. It's a series of elegant and well-preserved pavilions, many of them decorated incongruously with colonial-era European furniture. Visitors are welcome to stroll around, though there are no signs indicating what you are looking at. Evening dance performances are held in the courtyard, by far the best and most dramatic setting for these in Ubud.

Jalan Raya Ubud. Free admission. Daily during daylight hours.

Museums

Ubud has enjoyed a long relationship with foreign artists. As a result, the town has a few good museums and many galleries. All give you a crash course in authentic Balinese art, not to mention welcome respite from souvenir stalls. Of the many small museums in town, those listed below are the best choices, but don't pass up the free galleries around town, especially on Jalan Raya Sanggingan going north toward the more high-end resorts. In addition to the following, stop by the free **Seniwati Gallery of Art by Women** (Jalan Sriwedari 2B, Banjar Taman; ✆ **361/975485;** www.seniwatigallery.com) and the **Agung Rai Museum and Gallery** (Jalan Pengosekan; ✆ **361/976659;** www.arma museum.com), another popular local collection.

Antonio Blanco Museum The museum is an homage to Bali's famous Catalan expat. Born in the Philippines, Blanco arrived here penniless, but eventually befriended the king, married, had children, and lived the life of Riley all his days. He was a favorite at court and the confidant of many powerful people on Bali and in Indonesia. This grand gallery houses a collection of his work that is as much a romp through Blanco's sexual dalliances as anything, a collection of homespun, baroque pornography. Some paintings feature Blanco's raunchy prose poetry. Don't miss touring his studio space. The consummate

egomaniacal artist, Blanco envisioned this monument to himself and participated fully in its creation before shuffling off this mortal coil in 1999. The museum grounds are a trip, with Blanco's menagerie of dachshunds, monkeys, and exotic birds still ruling the roost.

Jalan Campuhan, just past the bridge heading north of Ubud. ✆ **361/975502.** www.blancobali.com. Suggested admission Rp50,000 ($4.45/£3.05) for international visitors; Rp30,000 ($2.65/£1.80) for locals. Daily 9am–5pm.

Neka Art Museum ★★ Founded in 1982 by Suteja Neka, a former schoolteacher and patron of the arts, this museum is a good introduction to the Balinese school. Housed in several pavilions, works are labeled in English and provide informed access to rural traditions and modern movements on the island and locally in Ubud. The collection features the work of the Dutch-born Indonesian artist Arie Smit, as well as contemporary works both local and from abroad. Don't miss the view of the Campuhan Gorge from the Smit Pavilion—you can see what inspires local artists (or get inspired yourself).

Jalan Raya Campuhan (about 10 min. north of central Ubud, near Ananda Cottages). ✆ **361/975074.** www.museumneka.com. Admission Rp20,000 ($1.80/£1.20). Mon–Sat 9am–5pm; Sun noon–5pm.

Puri Lukisan Museum ★ A major renovation has turned this formerly dilapidated display into something nearly on par with the Neka Art Museum (see above). The gorgeous gardens of lily ponds and rice paddies are worth a visit on their own. Founded in 1956 by a prince of Ubud and a Dutch artist, the collection of painting and sculpture here traces the evolution of Balinese art. One space is dedicated to a revolving exhibit of up-and-coming local artists.

Jalan Raya Ubud. ✆ **361/975136.** www.mpl-ubud.com. Admission Rp30,000 ($2.65/£1.80) adults, free for 15 and under. Daily 9am–5pm.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Just west of Ubud, the Ayung River has some good white-water rafting and kayaking. The rapids aren't too impressive for experienced rafters, but the scenery along the way is, with rice paddies, deep gorges, and photo-op waterfalls. Two-hour trips include all equipment, hotel pickup, and lunch; most hotels can make the reservations. You can also contact **Bali Adventure Tours** (✆ **361/721480;** www.baliadventuretours.com) or **Sobek** (✆ **361/287059**).

Ubud is surrounded by fascinating villages, scenic rice paddies, gorges, and rivers, and roads and paths lead to all of them. You can just wander, but I strongly urge you to buy a copy of the *Ubud Surroundings* map, available in all shops. Then head for the picturesque village of **Penestanan** or go on the rigorous **Campuhan Ridge** walk. Hiring a local guide is also a good option.

Ever seen a Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker? For an interesting day, meet up with famed author and naturalist **Victor Mason** (✆ **361/975009** in the daytime, or 812/29313801 in the evening; su_birdwalk@yahoo.com) for his popular **bird-watching tour ★** of Ubud. Tours cost $33 (£22) and leave Tuesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from the bridge at Tjampuhan in the northeastern end of town. You're bound to see a good many of Bali's 100 species of birds. The scenic walk includes lunch, water, and binocular use.

Elephant Safari Park ★★ Kids The Elephant Safari Park, run by **Bali Adventure Tours,** is less safari and more elephant ride, and it's a real hoot. These native Sumatra elephants are well cared for and live in large, lush enclosures. The owners have worked

Spa Treatments for All Budgets

Repeat visitors to Ubud are escapists, spiritual seekers, and relaxation junkies. The **Ubud Body Works Center** ★ (25 Hanuman Rd.; ✆ **361/975720;** www.ubudbodyworkscentre.com) focuses on Balinese healing techniques; while the atmosphere isn't luxe, the massages and body scrubs are fantastic and inexpensive. All of the high-end resorts have good spa services as well. **Alila Ubud** is luxurious, with open-air massage rooms and bathtubs without prohibitive prices (✆ **361/975963**). The **Four Seasons Resort at Sayan** (✆ **361/977577;** www.fourseasons.com) and the **COMO Shambhala** (✆ **361/978888**) are the best among them.

carefully with locals from Taro Village, previously one of Bali's most remote and untouched villages, to make sure they leave little more than elephant tracks. A safari starts with Pachyderm 101, as knowledgeable guides tell about the animals' care and feeding, local ecology, threats to the native population, and preservation efforts. Then, along with a *mahout* (guide), you'll have a galumphing trip through the jungle. Don't miss the antics of the youngest pachyderm; he's just taken up the game of soccer and can usually be found pouncing on an oversize ball in the central pond. A fun elephant show is staged twice daily at 12:30 and 3:30pm. The park has recently begun offering a night safari that begins at 6:45pm every night and includes an elephant talent show and a four-course dinner for $99 (£66) adults and $69 (£46) children.

Jalan Bypass Ngurah Rai, Pesanggaran. ✆ **361/721480.** Fax 361/721481. www.baliadventuretours.com. Reservations recommended. Admission (including transport, buffet lunch, and show) $47 (£31) adults, $73 (£49) with elephant ride; $35 (£23) children, $49 (£33) with elephant ride; family rates and Internet rates available.

Monkey Forest ★ (Kids) Yes, there is a monkey forest at the southern end of Monkey Forest Road, and this is a popular day trip. The towering tree clusters here are home to a troop of bad-tempered but photogenic primates that swing from branches, cannonball into pools of water, and do everything short of putting on suits and paying taxes, all to the general delight of photo-snapping visitors. Signs warn you not to feed the monkeys, but locals stand under those very signs selling you bananas and nuts for precisely that purpose. Do so if you must, but do not tease the critters, which are grumpy enough as it is—just hand them the food. Make sure you have no other food on you: They will smell it. They're also known to snatch at dangling or glittering objects and to gnaw on sandals. There's a small temple in the forest, and the track also leads to Nyuhkuning, a woodcarving village.

Monkey Forest Rd. ✆ **361/971304.** www.monkeyforestubud.com. Admission Rp10,000 (90¢/60p) adults, Rp5,000 (45¢/30p) children. Daily 8am–6pm.

SHOPPING

Ubud is the shopper's paradise of Bali, with everything from tacky plastic doohickeys to priceless works that will have you thinking of selling the SUV.

Start at **Ubud Market,** at the southeast corner of Monkey Forest Road and Jalan Raya Ubud. Open during daylight hours only, it's a real market—great noisy fun, with dozens of stalls selling produce and livestock along with tourist kitsch.

All along **Monkey Forest Road, Jalan Raya Ubud,** and **Jalan Hanoman,** shop after shop is filled with gorgeous sarongs, woodcarvings, mobiles, jewelry, incense, pottery, and gaily colored shirts. It's all geared to tourists, but the quality isn't bad. Elsewhere in town, you can find jewelry, housewares, and textiles.

Treasures, Toko, and **Toko East** are fine boutiques owned by the folks at Ary's Warung; find them on the main road in the center of Ubud or online at www.dekco.com. Other boutiques and galleries line the road running north of central Ubud toward the high-end resort area. The lace shop **Toko Uluwatu** has outlets all over Bali. You can find its popular storefront on Monkey Forest Road in the center of Ubud. **Okrakartini,** east of the palace on the main road (✆ **361/975624**), is an upmarket boutique with fine cloth, jewelry, and antiques. **Threads of Life,** Jalan Kajeng 24 (✆ **361/972187;** www.threadsoflife.com), a foundation that supports groups of weavers on the eastern islands of Indonesia, sells unique local patterns. For books, stop by **Periplus,** on Monkey Forest Road (✆ **361/975178**).

UBUD AFTER DARK

Ubud's nightlife scene is growing, but it's still rather sedate. **Jazz Café** (Jalan Sukma 2, east of Monkey Forest Rd.; ✆ **361/976594**), has good live jazz. There are lots of little laid-back places along Monkey Forest Road that are more than happy to stay open late. Upscale **Lamak** (✆ **361/974668;** www.lamakbali.com) stays up, but its scene is mostly calm. For a night of drinking and fun, hit **Naughty Nuri's** (p. 627; ✆ **361/977547**), where most dinners turn into a romp. **Café Exiles** (Jalan Pengosekan; ✆ **361/974812**) is where the disenfranchised come to fraternize and get anesthetized, particularly on Saturday nights; it's located just to the southeast of central Ubud.

For an evening of culture, there are usually several dance, music, and shadow-puppet performances to choose from every night in Ubud, both at the **Royal Palace** (p. 628) and on other nearby stages. A *barong* performance at the Royal Palace is the best and most stimulating choice; even the kids will like it. Touts selling tickets are ubiquitous; ask at any front desk for a recommendation.

SIDE TRIPS FROM UBUD

Day hiking in and around Bali is the real attraction, with rice fields set among low hills and small towns as far as the eye can see. Ask at any tour desk about day trips to the **Sayan Rice Terraces** ★, just north of Ubud. This deep-green valley, striated in stunning tiers and hanging with palms, is a photographer's dream.

Basakih Temple ★ Called the "Mother Temple," Basakih is Bali's premier Hindu site. Even if you come with your own guide, you'll have to hire a local to take you around the temple site; meet one out in front (he'll find you). The compound is a collection of 22 multitiered temples that look like Chinese pagodas. They're more interesting for their significance to Balinese culture than for their architectural qualities. The temples were destroyed in eruptions in 1917, and damaged in another incident in 1963. This is a working temple complex, with each compound attended by families. There are no signs for tourists, and ceremonies are often in progress—but the compulsory guides help prevent visitors from treading where they're not welcome. Be respectful and certainly ask before taking pictures, though usually foreign visitors are made welcome. This is a possible day trip from Ubud or Kuta; most visitors include a detour to the nearby volcanoes (see "Scaling the Heights: Bali's Volcanoes," below).

40km (25 miles) north of Klungklung. Admission Rp8,000 (70¢/50p), plus about $2 (£1.30) for a guide.

Scaling the Heights: Bali's Volcanoes

Gunung Agung, the tallest peak on the island at 3,014m (9,886 ft.), is quite a spectacle, visible from as far away as the island of Lombok and from high buildings in busy Kuta. It is a grueling 5-hour climb to the top. Easier is nearby **Gunung Batur,** Agung's little brother, just a few hours' hike. Both Batur and Agung are still active volcanoes, with eruptions as recent as 1997. Start before first light to catch the dawn. From the top, you can see the geothermally active surrounding crater, the volcanoes of nearby Lombok, and the looming peak of Agung.

Lots of small storefront outfitters arrange group bus tours and private transport. The area makes for a good overnight, too, though it can also be done as a day trip from Ubud. Rooms in the very basic lodging at the base of Mount Batur start at Rp30,000 ($2.65/£1.80). The town of Penelokan, a name that means "moved people" (a result of volcanic activity), stands at the rim of the crater. **Lakeview Hotel and Restaurant** (✆ **366/728790;** www.indo.com/hotels/lakeview) is a good bet, with deluxe rooms from $30 (£20). All rooms face the lake (thus the moniker), and helpful staff can arrange transport and trekking at a cost just slightly higher than if you go down and make your own arrangements at the trail head.

You do need a guide, however. It's not just the rules; it's a good idea. The sad part is that the local mafia masks itself as a government agency and controls the mountain guides. The cost of a tour, which includes transportation, a guide, and a breakfast of eggs, bananas, and bread, is rather expensive $45 (£30) per person; try to bargain down to $35 (£23). It's best to arrange any hiking plans at your guesthouse or hotel. Be sure to be fastidious and specific about details: Is it a private tour? Is breakfast included? What route will you follow?

There are a few different routes up both peaks. Most follow the trail to the main viewing point near the top of Batur (there's a little lean-to where folks have breakfast and wait for the sunrise). From there, you can follow a short loop to the various craters. You can arrange for a basic tour and then offer the guide a little extra for an upgrade.

It makes for a fun morning, which you can follow with a visit to the small hot springs near the lake. This is a stunning part of the island and certainly worth the trip.

8 CANDI DASA

The best reason to camp out in Candi Dasa is to take advantage of the peace, relaxation, and historic riches of the eastern corner of the island. The beaches are eroded and it's overdeveloped, but you can find some of the island's finest accommodations here. Many choose to stay in nearby **Padangbai,** an atmospheric little fishing village with some basic accommodations.

GETTING THERE

There are shuttles from all major tourist areas to Candi Dasa. Most of the hotels offer airport pickup for a fee.

GETTING AROUND

There isn't much to the town of Candi Dasa itself—just one road, parallel to the beach—so your feet will do you just fine. Hotels just outside the center generally offer regular shuttles into town. Most businesses catering to tourists will offer free pickup and drop-off. Motorbike rental and *bemos* are available, too.

Fast Facts Candi Dasa

Car & Motorbike Rental **Safari,** on the main road (✆ **363/41707**), is a reliable and friendly tourist agency with a selection of cars, jeeps, and motorbikes.

Currency Exchange Money changers can be found up and down the main road, offering competitive prices.

Internet Access Internet storefronts line the main street. Service is unreliable, but costs only Rp2,400 per hour (20¢/15p).

Mail **Asri Shop,** on the main street, offers postal services.

Telephones Candi Dasa's area code is **363.**

WHERE TO STAY

Very Expensive

Amankila ★★ The name of this ultraluxe resort means "beautiful hill," and it is just that. Private villas, luxurious beyond compare, open to the most stunning views of surrounding hills and ocean below. There is nothing typical about an Aman resort, and this breathtaking perch is no exception. Accommodations have it right in every detail. A solid-wood four-poster canopy bed dominates each spacious unit, which also comes with an enormous dressing area, lavish bathroom with sunken tub, and cushioned window seats. The high-end suites have better views and private pools. The Amankila has the only beach in Candi Dasa with sand. Its most striking feature is the giant tiered pool at the center, with water that matches the color of the ocean it seems to spill into. Amankila has every amenity, of course, and rooms and restaurants beyond compare, but what really sets this place apart is its meticulous service. Everyone is a rock star here.

Manggis, Bali. ✆ **363/41333.** Fax 363/41555. www.amankila.com. 34 units. $750–$1,100 (£500–£733) suite; $1,150–$3,100 (£767–£2,067) pool suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; outdoor pool; tennis court; spa; watersports equipment rental; motorbike rental; tour desk; car rental; 24-hr. room service; massage; laundry service; library w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, safe, IDD phone.

Expensive

Alila Manggis ★★ (Value) From the outside, this comfortable, contemporary place looks more like a boxy, concrete apartment complex, but inside it's all stark luxury. Chic rooms have clean lines, and everything is new and tidy. The staff is very friendly, and

 there are nice little touches such as afternoon tea and treats on your patio. The lush central lawn and pool area is surrounded by teak lounges and leads to a large pebble beach. Getting to town is a bit of a haul, but regular shuttles make it convenient. The hotel features its own line of special soaps that have spawned a local cottage industry. The hotel's restaurant, Sea Salt, takes its name from nearby salt-producing villages. Days at their popular cooking school include a visit to these areas.

Buitan, Manggis, Bali. ✆ **363/41011.** Fax 363/41015. www.alilahotels.com. 58 units. $210–$325 (£140–£217) double; $490–$690 (£327–£460) suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; watersports equipment rental; trekking; bicycle rental; tour services; shuttle bus; room service; babysitting; laundry service; cooking lessons; Internet access. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Moderate

Alam Asmara Dive Resort ★ This set of bungalows with an on-site dive shop are packed in tightly but are made private and intimate by the greenery and ponds surrounding each of the units. The rooms, while dark, are nicely furnished and come with luxurious partially outdoor bathrooms. A small swimming pool next to the ocean and an outdoor restaurant patio look out to the sea, and the sunsets from here are particularly nice. The reception area is decorated with a goldfish pond, and stone Buddhist sculptures dot the grounds. It's one of the best options on the sleepy Candi Dasa strip. Guests receive a complimentary 50-minute massage upon arrival.

Jalan Raya, Candi Dasa, Bali. ✆ **363/41929.** Fax 363/42101. www.alamasmara.com. 12 units. $95 (£63) bungalow. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurants and bar; outdoor pool; dive shop; spa; concierge; tour desk; airport transfer; room service; laundry service; cooking classes. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, hair dryer, safe, IDD phone.

Puri Bagus ★★ The Puri Bagus is a short ride from the town center and a good compromise between Candi Dasa's ultraluxe options and the more run-down budget stops. Pretty and romantic, this hotel is the best of its class. It's set on land jutting into the ocean, with steps leading right down to the beach. Good-size bungalows are airy and light, thanks to many large windows, and each has a small sitting area. Cool outdoor bathrooms have hand-held showers. The U-shaped pool has a deep section for scuba practice and a shallow area for kids. Dance programs and movies are offered at night, plus there's a full range of free daily activities and good dining at seaside. You'll also find a beautiful new spa area.

P.O. Box 129, Manggis, Bali. ✆ **363/41304.** Fax 363/41290. www.manggis.puribagus.net. 26 units. $120 (£80) double; $600 (£400) 7-room pool villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; outdoor pool; nearby tennis court; watersports equipment rental; bike and scooter rental; concierge; tour desk; car rental; shopping; room service (7am–midnight); massage; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, minibar, fridge, IDD phone.

Watergarden Kafé ★★ The simple thatched bungalows of the Watergarden may not be spectacular, but they're plenty comfortable. Each has a wide veranda overlooking the many lily ponds that give the hotel its name. The best and most private rooms are at the back. In-house dining at the Watergarden Kafé (see "Where to Dine," below) is some of the best in town. The place has a good laid-back feel that draws lots of return guests.

Main road, Candi Dasa. ✆ **363/41540.** Fax 363/41164. www.watergardenhotel.com. 14 units. $95–$110 (£63–£73) double; $180 (£120) 2-bedroom suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; popular bar (TJ's); small outdoor pool; tour desk; airport transfer; shopping; laundry service; library. *In room:* A/C (in some units), TV, Wi-Fi, minibar, IDD phone.

Inexpensive

Dewa Bharata, on the north end of the main road in Candi Dasa (✆ **363/41090;** dewabharatahotels.com), is typical of the good, basic beachside accommodations available here. Rooms start at $21 (£14).

WHERE TO DINE

The Alila's **Sea Salt** (p. 633) features the work of diligent Australian chef Penny Williams, who arrived in Bali only 2 years ago but has grasped the ingredients and methods of Balinese cooking; she teaches a cooking class offered several times a week for $85 (£57) per student. On Candidasa's sleepy strip, **Vincent's** (Jalan Raya; ✆ **363/41368;** www.vincentsbali.com) Continental and Balinese dishes keep its foreign crowd satisfied. The restaurant features a nice garden, a vibrant bar, and jazz tunes from the likes of Frank Sinatra and Diana Krall. The **Watergarden Kafé** (✆ **363/41540;** www.watergardenhotel.com) has decent local and Western fare (see "Where to Stay," above). Also recommended is **Kedai** (✆ **363/42020;** www.dekco.com), a chic little bistro from the owners of Ubud's Ary's Warung.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Big, healthy reefs teeming with marine life are just a short trip from the shores of Candi Dasa. There are lots of storefront outfitters in town able to arrange snorkeling and diving trips. Some spots are fit only for advanced divers; the wreck of the World War II USS *Liberty* is offshore at Tulamben. Hotels can arrange trips with operators along the main road, or you can try **Geko Divers,** out of Padangbai to the south (✆ **363/41516;** www.gekodive.com).

SIDE TRIPS FROM CANDI DASA

Tracing the coast north from Candi Dasa, travelers have the chance to see volcanoes to the left and stunning coast to the right. In the mornings, a visit to **Klung Klung market** (30 min. away from Candi Dasa), where locals shop for everything from live ducks to hand-woven baskets, gives visitors a real insight into daily life. **Tenganan,** just up the road from Candi Dasa, was set up as a tourist attraction by the government to show visitors the basic layout of a village. It feels a bit gimmicky but retains a sleepy enough feel that it's still worthwhile. At the village's gate, a guard asks for an entry donation; usually Rp10,000 to Rp20,000 (90¢–$1.80/60p–£1.20) is sufficient. The fishing village of **Amed,** about 2 hours north of Candi Dasa, is popular for snorkeling and diving. You can come on a day trip from Candi Dasa or even Ubud (it's easy to arrange land transport), though you might want to spend the night. The **Anda Amed Resort** (✆ **363/23498;** www.andaamedresort.com) is a property perched atop a cliff with bargain rates ranging from $60 to $108 (£40–£72) for one- to two-bedroom villas. A good beachside budget choice is **Amed Café** (✆ **363/23473;** www.amedcafe.com), with rooms as low as $10 (£6.65).

Some 4 hours of driving north and west along the coast brings you to **Lovina.** Famous for the schools of dolphins swimming just offshore, Lovina is a collection of bungalows and hotels on a quiet stretch of beach far from the madding crowd. **Damai Lovina Hotel,** Jalan Damai, Kayuputih (✆ **362/41008;** www.damai.com), has over-the-top luxury rooms overlooking town from $250 (£167). **Puri Bagus Lovina** (✆ **362/21430;** www.puri-bagus.com) offers less pricey luxury, with beachside rooms starting at $150 (£100). Budget accommodations are wall-to-wall along the beaches in Lovina. All accept

cash only and cost between Rp80,000 and Rp150,000 ($7.10–$13/£4.90–£9.15). Check out **Angsoka,** Jalan Bina Ria, Lovina Beach (✆ **362/41841;** www.angoka.com), a clean, comfortable choice with a pool; some rooms have air-conditioning.

Farther west of Lovina is the small village of **Pemuteran,** a quiet spot with a small cluster of beachside resorts. Pemuteran is a great base for diving and snorkeling trips to **Menjangan,** a small island bordering northwestern Bali. Try **Reef Seen Aquatics** (✆ **362/93001;** www.reefseen.com) for snorkeling and diving. The dive center has a turtle hatchery and reef gardening project, plus basic but nicely appointed rooms around $40 (£27). The best of Pemuteran's resorts is the **Matahari Beach Resort & Spa** ★ (✆ **362/92312;** www.matahari-beach-resort.com), with rooms ranging between $205 and $514 (£137–£343). Owned by a German butcher, the property features fantastic service, a world-class beachside restaurant, and a beautiful full-service spa. Just west of Matahari is the **Taman Selini Resort** (✆ **362/94746;** www.tamanselini.com), with a good Greek restaurant.

Lombok, a smaller island off the east coast of Bali, is a flight into the rugged landscape of unspoiled Indonesia. With a dry climate that's dominated by central volcanic peaks, Lombok is a predominantly Muslim island that attracts travelers hoping to get off the beaten track. Tourism infrastructure is limited, but beaches are unspoiled; this is also a popular base for trips to the outlying Gili Islands, known for their diving and snorkeling and Mount Rinjani, an active volcano ringed by a lake. **Blue Water Safari** (✆ **361/723479** or 813/38418988; www.bwsbali.com) and **Gili Cat** (✆ **361/271680;** www.gilicat.com) both have daily service to Lombok, leaving from Tanjung Benoa and Padangbai, respectively, but be prepared for a bumpy ride, especially in the wet season. One alternative is **Merpati** (✆ **361/235358** in Bali, or 370/636745 in Lombok), which flies several times daily from Bali to Lombok's **Selaparang Airport** (20 min.; approximately $30/£20). From there, connect to your destination by prearranged transport. The top choice for accommodations is the self-contained, luxurious **Oberoi Lombok** ★★, cousin of the popular Seminyak resort (Medana Beach, Tanjung, West Lombok; ✆ **370/638444;** www.oberoihotels.com), located on the far north of the island. The thatched-roof rooms and villas overlook a beautiful strip of beach and the Gili Islands beyond; the restaurants serve delicious Continental and Indonesian fare, and most guests enjoy the setting so much they don't set foot away from the resort. The hotel can arrange dive trips with a private Divemaster for a bargain $45 (£30) per dive, and the resort also offers surfing, snorkeling, and trips to the Gili Islands. Also nearby is the new **Hotel Tugu Lombok** (✆ **370/620111;** www.tuguhotels.com) a funky, bohemian cluster of villas and rooms decorated with antiques on a palm plantation near an 18-hole golf course. In contrast to Oberoi's luxurious feel, the Hotel Tugu is more for the offbeat traveler and has less-expensive rates. A main strip of hotels and inexpensive accommodations are available in the beach town of Senggigi farther south but are not particularly recommended.

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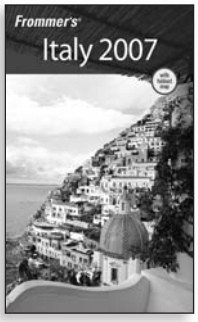

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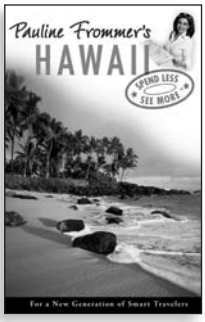

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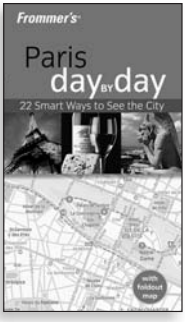

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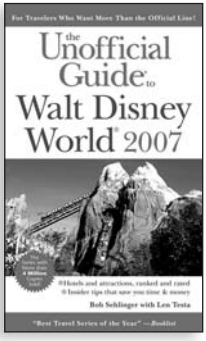
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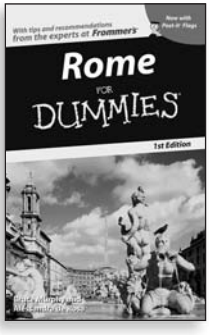

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